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THICKER THAN WATER

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THICKER THAN WATER

BY

JAMES PAYN

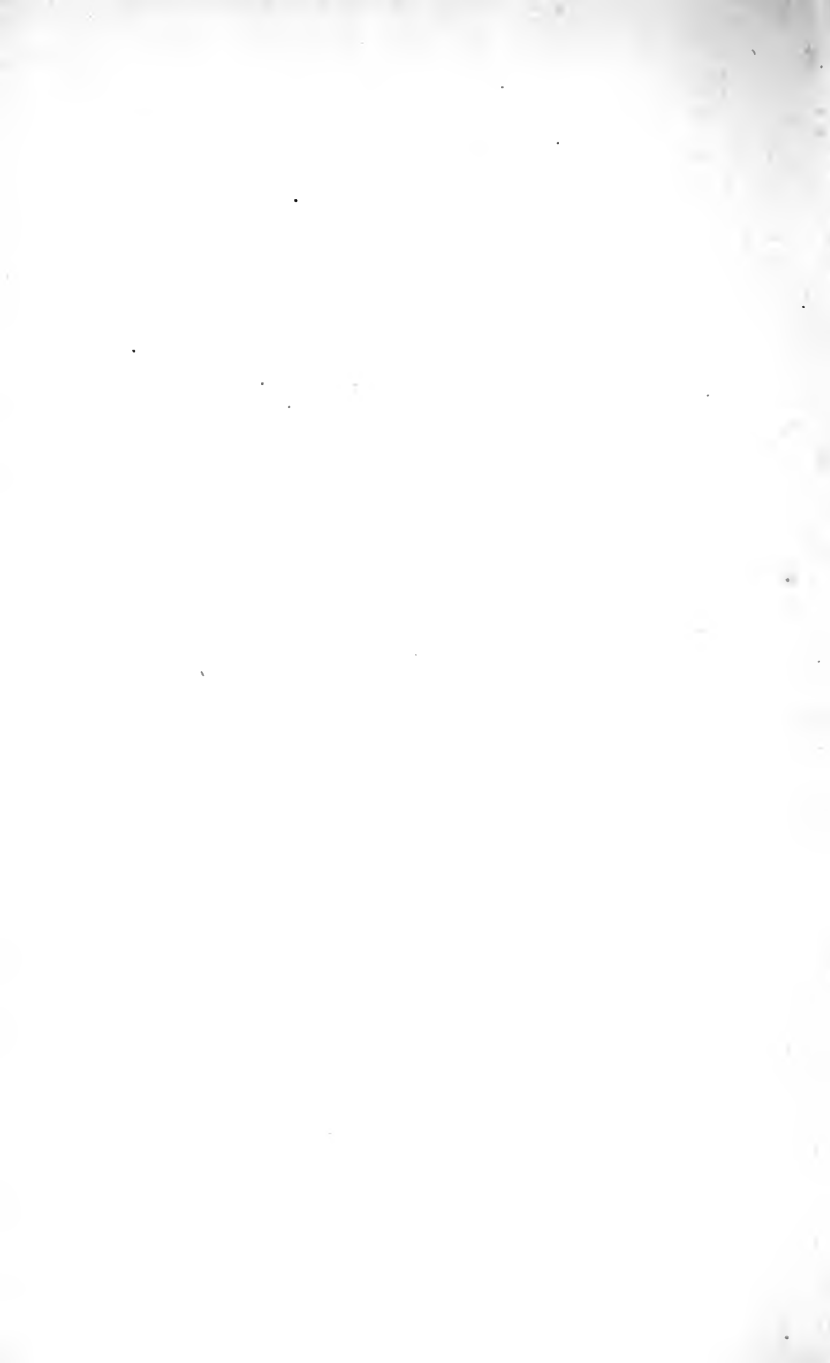
AUTHOR OF 'BY PROXY' 'HIGH SPIRITS' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON
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1883

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TO
GEORGE SMITH

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

BY HIS FRIEND

JAMES PAYN

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THICKER THAN WATER.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. BECKETT.

It is two o'clock in the July afternoon, and on what the majority of Londoners, in spite of Geronimo's opinion to the contrary, consider the pleasantest day in the week, because it is a half-holiday. Geronimo's objection to Saturday was founded, the poet tells us, on the prolonged wear of his shirt ; but to the city toiler that is a small objection ; indeed the greatest of all Londoners, and one who worked the hardest (though not, it is true, unless he was obliged), has left it on record, through his biographer, that he did not like clean linen.

Hyde Park is crowded with pleasure-seekers, but the Row is empty. The Upper Ten Thousand have gone home to lunch, the Over Two Millions have just dined. Beside the mile-long garden that extends from the Marble Arch to Apsley House, the 'swart mechanic' lounges, pipe in mouth, admiringly; he gazes at the glowing parterres of wondrous shape and hue, and wonders how 'them colour beds' are made, and (especially) who pays for them. He thinks how his Missis and the kids would enjoy the spectacle, and is half-inclined to fetch them; but upon reflection, and finding his mouth a little dry, considers the morrow better adapted for their recreation, and, crossing to the other side of the road, drops into the public-house in the mews. As he does so, he bestows, perhaps, a glance at the stately pile at its corner, and expresses an opinion, mingled with tobacco juice, that 'the cove as lives there must have a sight of money'—in which he is quite correct.

Of all the mansions in Park Lane, albeit there are some, although not many, larger,

Beckett House gives the strongest impression to the passer-by not only of wealth, but, what is a very different thing (and much better), the possession of an abundance of ready money. Just as on illumination nights we see the lines of some public edifice picked out with fire, so all the summer long the balconies of Beckett House show, tier on tier, their glowing lines of flowers. Under the large portico there is a miniature jungle of tropical foliage, and when at night the opened door gives a glimpse of the interior to the passing Peri, it seems to her an Eden indeed.

Nor even in winter does this shrine of Flora lack its gifts, for in the centre and on either wing are great conservatories, to which 'the time of roses' is but a poetic figment, and May (for once) is happy in December's arms.

Mrs. Beckett, the owner of this palace, has a passion for flowers, which her wealth enables her to indulge to the full. Nor is this the only proof of her good taste. She had once a handle to her name, but laid it aside by an act of

voluntary abnegation. Emperors and others have done the like before her, but a woman—never. Her first husband was Sir Robert Orr, a City knight, who left her an immense jointure and ‘her ladyship.’ He had never been remarkable for personal beauty, and unless in the sense of years—he was three times her age—could hardly have been called accomplished. It was a marriage of convenience ; but the old man had been kind to her in life and death, and she respected his memory. When she married her second husband, John Beckett, the railway engineer, she dropped her ‘ladyship’ ; Sir Robert had been intensely proud of the title, and she felt that it belonged to him. The law, of course, would have decided as much, but she might have retained it by courtesy. She was not a woman to parade her sentiments, and, having some sense of humour, was wont to account for this act of self-sacrifice upon moral grounds ; she did not think it respectable, she said, to figure with her husband in the ‘Morning Post’ as Mr. Beckett and Lady Orr ; she

left that suspicious anomaly for the wives of bishops.

John Beckett had been a rich man, though he could not have measured purses with Sir Robert, and he had ten times his wits. He had not wasted them much on building bridges or hollowing tunnels out of the 'too solid earth'; he left such enduring monuments to scientific theorists, and applied the great powers of his mind—he called them, without the faintest consciousness of self-satire, its 'grasp'—to contracts; mostly in connection with coal. He took the same practical view of matrimony, which poor Lady Orr had never guessed, and for her part had wedded her second husband for love. It was unintelligible to her that a man of so much wealth should pant for more; but he did so to his last breath. If he could have carried all his money (and hers) away with him—'to melt,' or 'to begin the next world with'—he would have done it and left her penniless. As it was, he died suddenly—killed by a fall from his horse below her very windows—and intestate.

Even when his scarce breathing body was lying in an upstairs chamber, and she tending it with all wifely solicitude, she could not stifle a sense of coming enfranchisement after twenty-five years of slavery, or the consciousness that her Sir Robert had been the better man of the two.

A woman of experience at least, if not of wisdom, was the present mistress of Beckett House; with strong passions, but with a not ungenerous heart; outspoken from the knowledge of her 'great possessions,' perhaps, as much as from natural frankness; a warm friend and not a very bitter enemy; and at the bottom of it all with a certain simplicity of character, of which her love for flowers was an example. She had loved them as Kitty Conway, the country doctor's daughter, when violets instead of camellias had been 'her only wear,' sweet-peas and wall-flowers the choicest ornaments of her little garden, and Park Lane to her unsophisticated mind like other lanes. 'Fat, fair, and forty,' she was wont to call herself at the

date this story opens, and it was the truth ; but not the whole truth. Fat she was and fair she was, but she was within a few years of fifty. Of course she was admirably preserved ; as the kings of old took infinite pains that their bodies after death should not decay, so women do their best for themselves in that way while still in the flesh ; and Mrs. Beckett was as youthful as art and care could make her. In shadow and with the light behind her, persons of the other sex might have set her down as even less mature than she described herself to be. There would have been at least ten years' difference between their 'quotations'—as poor Sir Robert would have called them—and that of her tiring maid.

Five years she had had of gilded ease and freedom, since drunken, greedy, hard John Beckett had occupied his marble hall in Kensal Green—Sir Robert had a similar edifice of his own in Highgate cemetery, for she had too much good taste to mix their dust—and on the whole she had enjoyed them. Far too well

favoured by fortune, however, not to have her detractors, she was whispered by some to be by no means averse to a third experiment in matrimony. 'There swam no goose so gray,' &c., they were wont to quote, and 'There was luck in odd numbers.' Gossips will say anything, and men delight in jokes against the fair sex. There is one about matrimony which was applied to the present case. A student of human nature once inquired of his grandmother (ætat. 80) at what age females ceased to experience the tender passion. 'My dear boy,' she answered, rather tartly, 'you must ask somebody much older than I am.' There was even a rumour, not old enough to be a legend, that Mrs. Beckett had once sounded her confidential man of business, Mr. Rennie, upon this subject. 'As you consult me as a friend,' he said—by which he meant gratuitously—'my opinion, my dear madam, is not worth much; but as to the remarriage of widows—in cases where they have thirty thousand pounds a year at their own disposal—I think it risky.'

Mrs. Beckett sighed, for she remembered that even when she was but twenty she had been married for her money. Still every man was not like John Beckett; and how nice Sir Robert must have been when he was young.

On the day on which our story opens, the widow was sitting in her drawing-room with a novel in her hand, on which, however, she was not bestowing that close regard, I do not say which such an agreeable description of literature has a right to expect, but even the commonest attention; her glance wandered with ill-concealed impatience over the top of her book to the gorgeous timepiece on the mantelpiece, the hands of which were travelling over gold and china towards two o'clock.

Suddenly her fair face flushed crimson; her eyes had met with another pair bound on the self-same errand; Miss Marvon, her young friend and 'companion,' was also watching the clock.

'Do you want your lunch, Mary?' inquired

the lady of the house, with a very good imitation of a yawn.

‘Not at all, thank you, Mrs. Beckett,’ was the quiet reply, delivered in the gentlest and sweetest of tones. It was not her dependent position that gave honey to her speech ; it was natural to Mary Marvon to be sweet and gentle to everybody, but especially to those who were kind to her ; and Mrs. Beckett had been very kind. The jewels on the girl’s shapely wrist, the lace about her dainty neck, the very dress which fitted her slight but graceful figure with such completeness, were all Mrs. Beckett’s gifts. Nay, in her dark-brown hair blushed a scarlet flower, which Mrs. Beckett, in her characteristic admiration for it, had placed there with her own hands that morning, as being the fittest setting for such a floral jewel. If anything were wanting to show how smooth and even was the social ground on which the two women stood, notwithstanding the conventional relation between them, it was found in the next words that Mrs. Beckett spoke. As a rule ladies do

not think it worth while to excuse themselves to their hired companions for this or that, whereas our widow paid hers the compliment of telling a 'tarradiddle,' or white lie, in order to explain her recent interest in the time-piece.

'I was thinking,' she said, 'what a want of originality and sense of appropriateness there must be in clockmakers, since they all represent the progress of Time by hands, as if he was an acrobat. If legs were too unpoetical or indelicate, they might at least use wings.'

'It is only with the exceptionally fortunate, however,' returned Mary, smiling, 'that Time moves on wings.'

'I doubt whether people are always the happier for that,' observed Mrs. Beckett.

'Perhaps not,' assented Mary. 'I should think those lives are the most enviable which are passed smoothly and equably, but not at eagle speed.'

'That was not quite what I had in my mind,' returned the widow, rising and looking

thoughtfully through the open window. ‘I was thinking that when Time seems to drag, because of our expectations, it is often better for us that it should drag on, and that they should remain without fulfilment. The secret of happiness in this world’—those three last words were mere garnish, and suited with her voice and manner no better than a flower made of a carrot or a turnip with some delicate entrée—‘is not to expect, but to make the best of what we have—— Was not that the front-door bell?’

The last observation was by no means uttered in the same philosophic tone as the rest, and a faint red suffused the widow’s cheeks. The colour too came into Mary Marvon’s face, which was, however, averted from her patroness, as she answered ‘I think so.’

Then they remained silent. If they were listening for a step upon the stair they must have been very sanguine, or else in possession of the gifts of Fine Ear in the fairy tale; for three-pile carpets are not good conductors of

sound. If they could have seen what was going on below stairs they would have seen *this*: a young man of four-and-twenty or so, bright-eyed and fresh-complexioned, but with that subdued air which betokens dry humour rather than that of the sparkling kind, had been admitted by the hall porter, and introduced by the good offices of two tall footmen to the butler, Harris. This personage preceded him up the staircase with much solemnity, but on the landing paused, perceiving that the visitor was not following him.

‘All right, my man,’ said a cheerful voice from below, ‘I will be with you at the finish, but I really cannot go your pace.’

Then he came up three steps at a bound, just in time to be announced at the drawing-room door as ‘Mr. Sotheran.’

‘Oh, it’s you, is it, Charley?’ observed the widow in a tone of undisguised disappointment.

‘Well, yes, in default of a better it’s poor me. Were you expecting an hereditary prince, or what?’

‘Lunch!’ said Mrs. Beckett, sharply.

Whether this was a reply to his question or an order to Harris seemed doubtful; but the butler took it in the latter sense.

‘It is served,’ he said, ‘me lady.’

The title he used seemed out of place; but the fact was, though Mrs. Beckett had voluntarily descended in the social scale, her servants had objected to that arrangement. The old ones had been permitted after her second marriage to address her by the old phrase, which they pretended they could not forget, while the new ones adopted it readily enough as giving importance to their office. Mrs. Beckett had made certain efforts to put a stop to it, and with this very man—‘Remember I am not “my lady,” Harris.’

‘Very good, me lady—I mean ma’am—but having always been with persons of title, if you will please to remember, it is difficult, in your ladyship’s presence too’ (Harris was astute and would have made an excellent ambassador,

except perhaps to the United States), 'not to say "me lady."'.

And I think Mrs. Beckett rather liked a practice which reminded the world how much she had given up, and from the noblest motives.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND OF THE HOUSE.

It was hard upon 'Charley' that his hostess had made it manifest she would have preferred to welcome somebody else; but what he felt much more was, that Miss Marvon also received him with a similar lack of enthusiasm.

'You are early to-day,' she said, not indeed without a pleasant smile, but that belonged to her and could no more be dispensed with than the Austrian lip or the Caucasian nose by their hereditary wearers: 'I am afraid you are defrauding the revenue.'

'And the tax-payers,' added Mrs. Beckett, 'which is me.'

'And this it is to be in a Government office!' exclaimed the young fellow, clasping

his hands despairingly ; ‘ to rise—but only by ten pounds a year—with the lark, to work like a horse at a mill-wheel, and if one shares a half-holiday with the poorest, and gets away from one’s house of toil upon a Saturday——’

‘ Come, take Mary’s arm, sir,’ interrupted the widow, ‘ and lead her downstairs—— No, my dear ’ (for Mary had modestly drawn back) —‘ I will not inflict myself upon him, and he hasn’t the strength for it. The duties of the young gentlemen in the Probate Office are too overwhelming.’

‘ No one can say we have not the Will,’ he began imploringly.

‘ Be quiet, sir ; you learn nothing but jokes there : Mary, I insist.’

Charley drew the young lady’s arm within his own, and with a murmur, ‘ How cruel she is to me ! ’ led the way to the dining-room.

From the above it may be gathered that, though she had behaved to him so scornfully, Mr. Charles Sotheran was by no means looked on with disfavour by the lady of the house ;

and indeed she treated none of his sex with such familiarity. His mother was a clergyman's widow who had been her school friend, and to whom she was still the 'Kitty' of thirty years ago. She had promised her, when the boy came up to town, that Beckett House should be a home to him, and he came in and out of it, as he himself expressed it, like a cat for whom a hole has been cut in the door. It was pleasant to see the expression of the widow's eyes as she followed the pair downstairs ; a woman would have translated it at once. 'I intend these two young people to be one, and a very pretty pair they'll make.'

Flesh and blood, however, are not so easy to match as Dresden china, and though Mrs. Beckett couldn't see it, or rather would not, there was an obstacle to her good intentions. Though one of the young people was willing enough to meet her views, the other was not. A Scotch lady, whose daughter was recently married, was asked by an old friend whether she might congratulate her upon the event.

‘Yes, yes,’ she answered, ‘upon the whole it is very satisfactory ; it is true Jeannie hates her gudeman, but then there’s always a something.’ Mrs. Beckett took a similar view ; she was aware that Mary Marvon had no love for Charley, but that circumstance did not deter her from pursuing her plan. When one has thirty thousand a year the will is strong. There was ‘always a something,’ she said to herself, and, though her *protégée* might feel no great affection for the young man at present, it would surely come in time. She knew from her own case that a marriage could be happy without much previous attachment on the lady’s part ; and, alas ! could be unhappy *with* it. Mary Marvon did not hate her possible gudeman ; on the contrary, she liked him very much, except when he showed symptoms of liking her too well, when she always put a stop to his advances. This state of affairs puzzled her patroness not a little. She would have suspected any other girl in Mary’s position of ‘looking a little higher’ than at a clerk in the

Probate Office, especially as she might have looked with success, for Miss Marvon's beauty and accomplishments, and perhaps the consciousness that she was the friend and *protégée* of a millionaire without a relative, had already brought more than one eligible suitor to her feet ; but Mrs. Beckett knew Mary too well to impute any such motive to her. The girl was of a proud and independent spirit, very susceptible to kindness, but of a nature that would have resented patronage from an archangel.

The wealth that surrounded her, notwithstanding that until the last few months she had been altogether unaccustomed to it, affected her no more than summer sunshine. She admitted to herself that it was pleasant and enjoyable enough, but if it came on to rain or even to snow, there were ways of passing one's existence within doors ; she had resources of her own and was independent of the weather.

These, however, were not material resources ; she had no patrimony, indeed she had never known either father or mother. The

one had died six months before she saw the light, and the other when she was but an infant. Mrs. Sotheran, who had been her mother's friend, had put her out to nurse, educated, and in a manner adopted her. But though she had shown her every kindness, and taken the utmost care in the selection of her home as regarded her well-being and comfort, that home had been a school. Though Mrs. Sotheran had often come to see her, she had never taken the orphan to her own house. The reason she had given for this was the state of her health, which indeed was delicate enough, the number of her family, and the calls upon her time made by an invalid husband; but the circumstance, taken in connection with the undoubted affection Mrs. Sotheran entertained for her, had been to Mary always unaccountable, and of late years, and since she had begun to think for herself, even mysterious. Mr. Sotheran had now long been dead, the children (of whom Charley was the youngest) had followed their father to the grave, and

there was plenty of room in the cottage at Letcombe Dottrell for Mary Marvon. Yet she had never been invited thither.

Mary's school, although not a fashionable one, had been a high-class establishment. She had been well treated, well brought up, and had wanted for nothing. Mrs. Sotheran's explanation of the matter was that only a moderate sum had been placed in her hands as provision for the orphan, and that it had been Mrs. Marvon's dying wish that it should be expended so as to shield her daughter's youth from the pangs and pains of poverty (from which she had herself suffered bitterly), and to fit her as best might be for the battle of life. There was not enough for Mary to live upon, but there was enough to keep her in comfort till she could provide for her own maintenance. A few hundred pounds, as Mary vaguely understood, was all that was left to her when, at eighteen years of age, she had exchanged the modest comfort of Minerva Seminary, Harrowgate, for the splendours of Beckett House.

To Mrs. Sotheran she owed—as she owed everything else—her present position, and for this she was more grateful to her than for all the rest. Not because it had opened for her the door of luxury, but for its introduction to one who had proved herself a gentle, considerate, and loving friend. Only on one subject had Mrs. Beckett and her young companion disagreed since the latter had come to share her home; namely, as regarded the young gentleman who was now escorting Mary down to luncheon. That Mr. Charles Sotheran was good-looking, good-tempered, agreeable, and very much a gentleman, Mary admitted; she had not a word to say against him except as a lover.

When Mrs. Beckett had gone on to hint that, though Charley's salary was small, and increased by no means 'by leaps and bounds,' a few strokes of her pen would soon alter all that, and that it would give her great pleasure to make them, Mary had demurely observed that Mrs. Beckett could not bestow

her bounty upon a worthier object than Mr. Charles Sotheran; but that, so far as she (Mary) was concerned, he might have ten thousand a year, but would still be unacceptable to her as a husband.

‘Then you must be either a born fool, Mary,’ cried the widow, for the first time losing her temper with her young favourite, ‘or you must have had your brain turned by romances.’

‘As we were never allowed to read romances at Minerva House, my dear Mrs. Beckett,’ returned Mary, cheerfully, but with a spot of red on each cheek, ‘I suppose I must accept the former of your two alternatives.’

And she added a little curtsy by way of acknowledgment.

The curtsy, I think, went even further with Mrs. Beckett than her words; as a reproof, it affected her not one whit, for very rich people are rarely thin-skinned; but it showed the other’s coolness and determination. Though the widow by no means gave up her

object, from that moment she ceased to press it; she knew that, notwithstanding all the resources of science, there are some fruits which can never be brought on by forcing, and was compelled to believe that this was one of them. Henceforth she trusted to the sunshine and the showers: circumstance and opportunity.

As the three took their seats at the well-spread board, Charley nodded in his off-hand way to a vacant chair: 'What Banquo is sitting there?' he inquired.

'The Dornays promised to be here,' said Mrs. Beckett curtly.

'Oh, indeed, Banquo *and* Fleance! Then I've got one of *their* chairs.'

'Of course you have, sir; you were not expected, though we are very glad to see you, and they *were*.'

'It is better to come to a feast when you are not asked,' observed Charley, with a philosophic air, 'than to be asked and not come.'

'And much better manners,' assented Mrs.

Beckett, warmly. 'For my part I don't understand such conduct. Guests who come late to lunch are almost as bad as those who come late to dinner, and *they* are unpardonable. For my part I cannot understand why Society tolerates it.'

'Still it is a sign of good position,' remarked Charley, with a twinkle in his blue eyes. 'It is only important people who venture to do it. They are titled and say to themselves, "Our host is an inferior person, so will not resent our rudeness," or they are rich, and he owes them money and dares not.'

'How can you be so foolish, Charley?' said Mary, reprovingly.

'But, my dear Mary, it must be so,' continued the young man, gravely, 'or why does the host wait for them to the inconvenience of his other guests, and though he knows the dinner is spoiling? For my part I always endure the extra half-hour with great patience for my host's sake; for I say to myself, "His debts will be made easier to him on this

account, or perhaps forgiven to him." He can't be so foolish or so slavish as to put up with such behaviour *for nothing*.'

'Upon my word, I think Charley's observations are very sensible,' remarked Mrs. Beckett, grimly. 'If people can get to a railway station in time, they can come in time for dinner. A quarter of an hour for the difference of clocks I do allow, but beyond that I would not wait for a Rothschild or a Royal Highness.'

'Yes, but then you see you don't owe Rothschild anything, Mrs. Beckett, and Royal Highnesses are always in time.'

'Quite true,' replied the hostess, with approval. 'It is only your *parvenus* who take such liberties.'

'Still there are such things as accidents,' put in Mary, apologetically.

'Accidents and offences,' muttered Charley.

'That is only another reason why nobody should wait,' argued Mrs. Beckett; 'I always say to persons who are so ill-bred as to be

behind time, "I was sure that nothing but an accident would have detained you, and therefore we sat down." Nobody but a madman, for example, would think of waiting for a doctor, who may be sent for at a moment's notice. Harris, let those two dishes be taken out and kept warm.'

'Justice tempered with mercy,' observed Charley.

'You are a very impudent young man,' said the hostess, smiling.

'My dear Mrs. Beckett, you are altogether in error: it is native shyness; a thing that is often mistaken for sheer impertinence. I should not have dreamt of coming here to-day, for example—and without an invitation—and especially at luncheon time' (his hostess was hospitality itself, but here she smiled satirically), 'if I had not had something to communicate to you of the last importance. I had news to-day from Letcombe Dottrell.'

'Good news, I hope?' inquired Mrs. Beckett with interest. 'The last time I heard from

your mother, she wrote in what was, for her, fairly good spirits.'

'She's lost them now, poor thing!' sighed the young man.

'But what has happened?' cried Mary. 'I heard from her only the other day. I am quite sure there's not much the matter, Charley, or, to do you justice, you would have told us long ago, instead of talking such nonsense.'

'That is the first civil word you have spoken to me, Mary; I'm so much obliged. It is so nice to hear you say you believe I have some natural affection. It puts one quite on a level with the brutes.'

'*Will* you tell us your news, sir?' broke in Mrs. Beckett, impatiently. 'Though we care nothing about *you*, you know how interested we both are in your dear mother. If you kept her in a state of suspense like this it would frighten her to death.'

'That's just what's the matter with her,' answered Charley. 'She *is* almost frightened

to death. And no wonder! There's a giant at Letcombe Dottrell.'

'A what?' exclaimed both ladies simultaneously.

'A giant! eight feet, nine feet, ten feet—I don't know how many feet he is—who takes his seven-leagued strides about the parish quite composedly. And he don't live in a caravan either, as you may think, but at the hall itself. He is Mr. Beryl Paton's last *protégé*.'

'Oh, Charley, this is too absurd!' ejaculated Mrs. Beckett.

'It's as true as that I sit here, madam, eating apricot omelette. In addition to the Archæologists, the Metaphysicians, and the Everythingarians, whom the squire has gathered about him, there is now—last, but by no means least—a Giant.'

'But why? There is nothing in being nine feet high, or even ten feet, to excite good Mr. Paton's sympathies. There must be merit, or at least presumed merit, or some pitiful misfortune, to do that.'

‘I don’t know about that, Mrs. Beckett : perhaps he’s an orphan giant ; but there he *is*. Looking down the cottagers’ chimneys as he takes his walks abroad ; and, what is worse, into the bedroom windows at the rectory. Mr. Wells has complained about it, but the giant says he can’t help it ; it’s his natural focus ; he’s not in the same plane with his fellow-creatures.’

‘Why, Mr. Paton must be going mad!’ exclaimed Mrs. Beckett.

‘Going?’ echoed the young man ; ‘a less charitable person would have said gone.’

‘How shocking ! Why, they say he owns half the county.’

‘Yes ; that’s what of course makes the case so very distressing.’ Not a muscle of the speaker’s lips moved in the direction of a smile ; nor did his hostess suspect the young man’s seriousness for an instant, but Mary shot at him a reproving glance. ‘Do you think it good taste,’ it said, or seemed to him to say, ‘to laugh at the weaknesses of so good a friend before her very face?’

‘But where on earth, Charley, did Mr. Paton first see the creature?’

‘Well, one would think by my mother’s description that he must have seen him always; that it was impossible for such a portent, being in the same hemisphere, to avoid observation. But, as a matter of fact, Mr. Paton found him in a caravan. You know his passion for the wonders of nature; and, attracted by some advertisement of a straight-haired negress, he came upon this prodigy. Of course he was charmed with him, and expressed his astonishment that so great a man should not only condescend to be exhibited with the African lady, and for the same moderate charge of a penny, but should put up with a smaller type in their caravan advertisement. This roused the giant’s ambition; he struck for higher wages and a separate establishment, and, on his master’s declining his terms, came straight away to Mr. Paton as to his natural adviser and protector. The excitement in the neighbourhood is prodigious, and you may imagine the sensation his

arrival at the hall has created in the Happy Family itself.'

'Oh dear! dear! I can indeed,' gasped the widow, now fairly sobbing with laughter. 'You have never seen Mr. Paton and the *ménage* at the hall, Mary, or you would know how to appreciate this. But of course this creature is not going to *stop*, Charley,—large as the house is, where can they put him?'

'I am sure I don't know; perhaps Mr. Paton will build a wing——'

At this moment, and while the air was rippling with mirth, the door opened, and, in a voice as though he were introducing the guests to a funeral feast, the butler announced 'Mr. Dornay and Mr. Ralph Dornay.'

CHAPTER III.

DEFIANCE.

THERE are few social crimes more exasperating—at all events to the *raconteur*—than the entrance of an outsider into a room where an excellent story is in course of narration. A Newfoundland dog coming out of the water and shaking himself over your light summer costume is nothing to it. It is an interruption not only unpardonable, but irreparable; let the new-comer be as anxious to mend matters as he may, the story is spoilt. Nothing can bring back ‘the splendour to the grass, the glory to the flower,’ or set Humpty Dumpty on his legs again. This should be borne in mind by all those folks who, having the intention to give intellectual pleasure (which few of them have),

are wont to ask some of their friends to 'dinner,' and others 'in the evening.' The former portion of the company are at their ease; they have established a mutual understanding, and formed a regular regiment with their watchwords and their countersigns; the others are raw recruits, and can never be welcomed as comrades.

It was not easy to discomfit Mr. Charles Sotheran, but the arrival of these new-comers made him exceedingly angry, and the more so because it was easy to perceive that his hostess and Miss Mary by no means shared his displeasure. Mrs. Beckett's welcome to them was indeed tinged with irritation: 'So you are come at last,' she said, but it was in a tone which implied that late was better than never, and the pressure of her hand was in both cases very reassuring. Miss Marvon said nothing but 'Good morning,' but she said it with her brightest smile, and her hand remained longer in that of Mr. Edgar Dornay (or so Mr.

Sotheran thought) than the occasion at all demanded.

Mr. Edgar was the younger of the two visitors. A tall, well-favoured fellow enough, save for a slight touch of effeminacy or dandyism. His slight black moustache was twirled into points so sharp that they might have threaded the eye of a needle ; he had a frameless, stringless glass, which stuck in his eye with the tenacity of a limpet, and he spoke with an elaborate slowness which seemed to suggest the extremity of exhaustion. But he had an intelligent face nevertheless, and what he said was well expressed.

Mr. Dornay the elder was Edgar's uncle, and twice his age—the one being fifty or so, the other twenty-five—but there was no such disproportion of years in their appearance. Edgar's quiet ways and well-considered speech would have better suited one of an elder generation ; his manner was essentially mature ; it was only in his smile that youth was manifested. He did not often smile, but when he

did so one acknowledged that a man could be beautiful: he reminded you of the Sun-god. Now Mr. Dornay senior's smile was the worst part of him. He performed the operation, as the Scotch gentleman acknowledged that he joked, 'with deeficulty,' for fear of showing certain false teeth. It is terrible to reflect that when one grows old even a smile loses its charm. It is nature's hint, perhaps, that it is time that our laughing days were over, but it is a very grim one.

When Ralph Dornay did not smile, or smiled with care, he was an attractive object, and not the least like an uncle. His age might have been guessed at forty, and his figure, set off by a dark-blue frock coat, and an irreproachable white waistcoat, was that of a man still younger. His eye was bright, his voice cheery, and his speech gay and fluent. One would have set him down as a soldier of the genial old-fashioned type, or one of those clever Irishmen who have contrived to smother their brogue. As a matter of fact, he was of no

occupation, and an Englishman. He belonged to an ancient family, of which his nephew was the chief, and he regarded him with great respect accordingly. If it could not be said of him that he passed his life in defending Edgar's character, he was always ready to break a lance for him against the many antagonists whom the young man's airs and graces evoked. And this was the more creditable to him as he could derive no material benefit from such championship. When the junior branches of old families are in these days demonstrative in their attachment to the head of their house, he has generally something to give them. Though the feudal system is extinguished, human nature is much the same as it used to be; the difference is in degree and kind. Even a duke can now hardly insure protection and immunity for the peccadilloes of his vassals; but even in less ambitious quarters there are some good things going still, and for the maintenance of family loyalty there is no such preserving pickle as expectations. Now Edgar Dornay, though in

possession of Cliffe Park, the hereditary dwelling-place of his race, could not afford to live there even if he had wished to do so, which was, however, far from being the case. The estate was mortgaged up to the hilt, and burdened with all sorts of payments to certain elderly relatives and connections, to whom the expression, 'first come, first served,' was much more than a phrase. The present head of the family was, in fact, less well provided for than the branches, one of whom was Uncle Ralph himself. What he had was not very much, it is true ; but when one is prudent and careful to spend every shilling upon one's own needs, a little money may be made to go a great way. He had certainly no hope of any increase from his nephew's garner.

Yet there were some who denied that Uncle Ralph's feudal attachment was altogether disinterested, since it was to his nephew's friendship that he owed his place in society. Edgar Dornay was not popular among his own sex, but his very unpopularity was in some

sort a tribute to his importance; men do not take the trouble to dislike the insignificant, and Edgar had made a certain position for himself. Without being a preacher of æsthetics, he could talk its jargon, and thoroughly understood the art of persuading folks that they are catching gleams of the Unintelligible when in reality they only understand what you are saying about it. The women who wished to be thought artistic, philosophic, and also exceptionally well dressed, adored him. Women of a higher type he caught with another springe. With them he was as frank as with the others he was obscure; each one was flattered with the idea that he only 'spread himself' for her, and laid bare the aspirations of a noble nature which were concealed from the multitude by a mask of reticence and pedantry. For the rest, he was not without his good points; though Mr. Charles Sotheran could never perceive them. The one young gentleman had something too much of nature about him, the other a great deal too much of art. They mixed

together no better than water and sulphur, and it was no spoon that could smooth matters between them. Mrs. Beckett had confided to Mary that she always felt on thorns when they were in each other's company ; and it was because she had been expecting the Dornays that afternoon that 'Charley' had not been received with his usual cordial welcome. The whole matter had been clear to him directly their names were mentioned, and easily accounted for the bitterness with which he had spoken of the Unpunctual. A vice never seems so reprehensible as when it is practised by those we dislike.

When the Dornays entered, Sotheran rose from his seat and took his leave.

'So soon?' said Mrs. Beckett in her kindest tone.

The tone he knew was to make amends for his voluntary exile ; the words were a mere compliment.

'You will give my love to your dear mother when you write,' said Mary, warmly.

He nodded, and smiled grimly as though he were thinking 'I haven't got it to give,' or perhaps because he felt that he was leaving her with a happier rival.

A few words of kindness too were given him by the hostess after his departure. 'What a bright fellow Charley is; I really don't know any one with such a flow of spirits.'

To which Mr. Dornay the elder replied, 'Quite true, a most engaging young man;' and his nephew yawned approval.

These tributes to the departed having been duly paid, the company proceeded to discuss their usual topics. The conversation was not intellectually above the level of that which takes place at most afternoon teas, which, while ranging from Shakespeare to the musical glasses, has a decided tendency towards the latter: though, thanks to the food and wine, it had perhaps more vigour and spirit. Edgar spoke with severity against some new theory of admitting the principle of humour into decoration; alluded to the fancy alphabet, with

its dropped H, in a well-known dining-room at Kensington; and animadverted against gargoyles in architecture. Though his views were far from lucid they were well expressed, and gave almost the same impression of solidity (though they had none) as a stereoscope; the red light of a chemist's shop under similar circumstances—*i.e.* in a dense fog—assumes the resemblance of the sun. Uncle Ralph, though to all appearances rapt in admiration of his nephew's eloquence, understood not one syllable of it, and presently the widow herself 'dropped off gorged' with so much splendid colouring, and observed in a low tone to him—

'You were at Ascot, of course, Mr. Dornay, on Thursday?'

'No, not I; the Derby is my only dissipation in that way;' then added in a low voice, 'Edgar was there, I am sorry to say, and, as usual, unfortunate.'

'How naughty he is!' said the widow, looking towards the young man with more pity,

one would say, for his bad luck than reprehension of his bad habits. 'I shall take the opportunity of giving him a lecture. Mary, I see Mr. Dornay has no flower in his buttonhole; choose him one from the conservatory.'

The observation of course referred to Uncle Ralph; Mr. Edgar Dornay would as soon think of coming out without a flower in his buttonhole as without his hat. Mary rose at once to obey, or oblige, her hostess. It was curious, but short as was the interval that had elapsed since Mrs. Beckett's attention had been diverted from decorative art, its high priest had ended his dissertation upon it, and was now conversing with Mary in low tones upon some other subject—to judge from her look—at least an equally attractive one. As she rose, he too left his chair, and having opened for her the glass door of the conservatory—hardly a sitting-room in Beckett House was without one—was about to follow her into it when the widow called him back, in a tone which could not be gainsaid.

‘ You are an arbiter of taste, Mr. Edgar, as every one knows, but surely your uncle is the best judge of what flower he prefers for his own coat.’

So Uncle Ralph took his place by the young lady’s side, closing the door behind them, while the widow and Edgar were left *tête-à-tête* together. A glass-door is a non-conductor of sound, but one can see through it ; and as Mr. Ralph Dornay wished to have a few words with his companion in private, he made a pretended admiration for southern plants and trees his excuse for straying with her beyond the flora, portion of the conservatory, and among the tropical vegetation. Though the old powers of fern seed to render one invisible are scoffed at in these days, there is no doubt of ferns doing it if they are but tall enough ; and the same, even without that reservation, may be said of palms.

‘ Do you know the language of flowers, Miss Mary ? ’ inquired Uncle Ralph in significant tones.

‘When I was a child I learnt it,’ she answered indifferently, but with an inner sense of expectancy, nevertheless, that it cost her some pains to conceal. She did not anticipate that Mr. Dornay was going to make love to her, but there was something in his voice which, in connection with what she knew of him, led her to fear—or hope—that he was about to speak of love.

‘Then you know what the palm signifies,’ he continued, looking up at the branches that canopied them. It was observable that throughout their interview Mr. Dornay always did look either up or down, and never at the face of his companion, so that a spectator (who did not hear him) would have said, ‘This gentleman thinks of nothing but trees and flowers.’

‘The palm indicates victory,’ said Mary, quietly.

‘Just so. I am here to say that it lies within your grasp.’

‘I do not understand you, Mr. Dornay.’

‘I think you do. But it is only natural—

or at all events prudent—that you should affect unconsciousness. You imagine that you are in the presence of an enemy, and are inclined to look upon even his gifts with suspicion.’

‘I understand you now, Mr. Dornay,’ she replied, and this time very coldly, ‘even less than before.’

‘Then your change of tone belies you, my dear young lady,’ he answered curtly; ‘come, the opportunity that has been afforded for our speaking together must needs be short; do not let us waste time in fencing. You will admit, I suppose, at least this much, that you love my nephew. Your face indeed tells me so; for while I speak of him it has changed as though this white camellia had become a red one. But I have known it long ago; Edgar and I have no secrets from each other.’

‘I am very sure that your nephew never told you—what you have just now had the impertinence to imply.’

‘Quite true, Miss Mary. He only told me that he loved *you*; I took it for granted that

there was reciprocity ; the theory of “ the most favoured nation ” holds equally good with individuals. I must needs add, in spite of your disclaimer, that you knew that I knew it. Confess, now, that you have hitherto considered me as—well, not as an enemy perhaps, but an antagonist, an obstacle, but for which the course of true love would have run more smoothly. I have treated you, never, I hope, with disrespect, but in a manner, I confess it, that may have suggested hostility.’

The girl looked up at him with disdain ; the expression was lost upon him, for he was regarding an orange on its tree with all the attention of an intending purchaser ; but he could not escape the scornfulness of her tone.

‘ You have treated me, Mr. Dornay,’ she said, ‘ I do not say with studied indifference, but with that indifference which is natural to you when you are addressing persons of no consequence, and from whom you can reap no benefit.’

‘ Bitter, bitter ! ’ returned the other, with a

reproachful look at the golden fruit ; ‘ to think that a thing so beautiful should have pips in it.’

‘ As to your being an obstacle,’ she continued, ‘ if anything which such as you can say can turn a man’s heart from her he loves, and induce him to give her up, for her own sake he had better do so : for if she be a true woman, let her be ever so poor, he would not be worthy of her.’

‘ Heroics,’ muttered the other contemptuously ; ‘ you should speak them in blank verse.’ Blank or not, however, there had been something in her words that had gone home to him, for his voice trembled with rage as he added, ‘ Upon my life, young woman, you are not very conciliatory !’

‘ It would be useless for me to be so, even if I felt inclined, which I do not,’ was the quick rejoinder. ‘ Conciliation with some people has only the effect of encouraging them to tread on you.’

‘ I recognise the sentiment, Miss Mary, which I heard expressed the other day—only

more in the rough—by the young gentleman who has just taken his leave of us. I would respectfully advise you—for the object you have at heart—not to sit at the feet of that youthful Gamaliel; Edgar and I do not like him.’

‘Very likely. To one at least of you I can imagine his independence of character being very unwelcome.’

‘In a clerk of the Probate Office, of tender years, I must confess it seems to me somewhat out of place,’ answered Dornay. ‘On the other hand it is an easy *rôle* to play, and admits of great self-indulgence in the way of impertinence; nor do I lose sight of the fact that Mr. Charles Sotheran may think it acceptable to a certain person as an agreeable change from the flattery and adulation that she meets with elsewhere.’

‘Fresh air after incense! Well, that is very complimentary,’ said Mary, smiling for the first time.

‘I should rather call it pumped air,’ said

Mr. Dornay. ‘However, Mr. Sotheran is not worth debate. What I wish to say is, that however right you may have hitherto been with respect to my feelings towards you as regards my nephew, they have undergone a complete change. I have done my best to oppose your union with him and have failed. I lay down my arms and acknowledge myself vanquished. Henceforth I am upon his side and yours. If you will not permit me to be your friend ——’

She shook her head and drew back: ‘I mistrust you, Mr. Dornay,’ she said coldly.

‘Edgar told me that you were frankness itself, and begged he’s right!’ exclaimed the other, admiringly. ‘If he had but half your determination of character he would be in a very different position; but he is so d—d weak!—I beg your pardon for the expression, Miss Marvon.’

She bowed: ‘You forget to whom you are apologising, sir; I am only a dependant.’

‘Very true, but you are going to be Mrs.

Dornay,' observed the other, naïvely. 'Now, my dear young lady, do be reasonable,' he continued remonstratingly. 'If we can never be friends—which is your suggestion, not mine, remember—at least let us be allies. When you become my nephew's wife, consider how inconvenient—not to put it more strongly—this mutual distrust will be to both of us. You will have great influence, no doubt; but I am the nearest relation, and should anything occur to shake the pillars of domestic peace, as Edgar calls it, he will naturally look to me for advice. Then I may do you a good turn.'

'I do not believe you are picturing me as your nephew's wife at all, Mr. Dornay,' was the girl's quiet reply.

'I am. Upon my soul and honour I am!' put in the other vehemently. 'As sure as I breathe I will do my very best to bring about your marriage. That is what I have come here to say, so help me Heaven!'

'It may be so. But you have something else to say.' You have omitted to name the

price I am to pay for your valuable assistance.' It could not have been the effect of sunlight, because they both stood in the shade; though those who knew him best would certainly have ascribed it to some atmospheric illusion; but here Mr. Ralph Dornay blushed.

'I don't know what you mean, Miss Mary,' he answered; 'but of course there are considerations. I have hinted to you how we can, as near connections, be mutually useful to one another in the future.'

'And in the meantime?' said the girl, scornfully. 'Is there nothing I can do for you in the meantime?'

'Nothing. You have already said, though in a manner that I hope your better nature has already repented of, that you could be of no advantage to me.'

'True. Still it strikes me that it may have struck you, Mr. Dornay, that circumstances may arise in which I might be of some *disadvantage* to you. Humble as is my position, it is just possible my advice may be asked by a

certain person upon a matter in which you are very much interested; one which has only recently entered your mind, I think, but which is now monopolising it, and concerning which, to use your own candid language, I might do you a good turn—or not.'

'Well?' It was but a monosyllable, yet pregnant with significance, and the speaker for the first time looked full in his companion's face with anxious interest.

'If I am asked my opinion of that matter, Mr. Dornay,' she continued, 'I shall give it honestly. Nothing which you can promise me; nothing which you can give me (which is very different), will deter me from so doing. On the other hand, your secret is as safe with me as it was before you spoke. I will do you no voluntary injury, though you have done many a one to me.'

'I never have,' he murmured.

'Yes, sir; for slights, humiliations, even neglect itself, to one like me, are injuries. Though you used no daggers you have spoken

them designedly, and of malice prepense ; words that lie as ready to the tongue of the upstart and the coward, as does the dagger to the hand of the assassin. I do not forgive them ; I do not forget them ; but I should scorn myself as I scorn you if they suggested retaliation.—And now that we clearly understand one another, what flower shall I gather for your buttonhole, Mr. Dornay ? ’

Without a word he pointed to the nearest flower, which happened to be a blush rose. She clipped it with her scissors, and gave it to him ; then turned and led the way back to the dining-room.

CHAPTER IV.

LEAP-YEAR.

IT is not the scene which dictates the sentiment, or the conversation between Uncle Ralph and Mary Marvon among the ferns and flowers would have been of a very different kind to that we have described.

The dining-room, on the other hand, though a very noble apartment, would hardly have suggested by association—not to mention the débris of lunch which still strewed the table—any tender topic; yet no sooner did the other couple leave it, and the widow find herself alone with Mr. Edgar Dornay, than her voice and manner softened, and her face became full of a gentle earnestness and sympathy.

‘My dear Edgar,’ she said, in a pleasant voice, ‘I have got something very serious to say to you.’

He took the chair beside her to which she had beckoned him, and answered with his brightest smile, ‘Your preface frightens me, my dear Mrs. Beckett; but you don’t *look* serious, which gives me consolation.’

‘I wish to look serious, Edgar; vexed and disappointed too; nay, I would be downright angry with you, only somehow I never can. I am sure I don’t know what it is that makes me so kind—nay, blind—to your failings?’

She spoke half interrogatively, as though if he had any theory upon that point she would be glad to hear it; but he only shook his head.

‘That is my best chance with you and with everybody,’ he said hastily, ‘that they should shut their eyes, or at the worst wink at my peccadilloes; for they are many.’

‘Well, it is something that you show humility,’ she answered, though with a touch of disappointment mingling with that faint

praise ; ‘and I do believe they are but peccadilloes, Edgar.’

I don’t know,’ he answered ; ‘some moralists would be very severe on me ; but you, I venture to think, are not a hanging judge.’

‘By which you mean, I suppose, you naughty man, that I would not hang *you*.’ She tapped his hand lightly with her fingers, and looked at him certainly with an expression very different from that of a judge when he puts on the black cap. Mrs. Beckett had not actually taken to caps, but, perhaps as much for concealment as for ornament, a piece of lace, scarcely the size of her own plump hand, was arranged becomingly enough in her brown hair, still unmixed with grey.

‘Well, yes, I venture to think you would lean to mercy’s side in my case.’

‘But then, Edgar, I don’t believe you have ever done anything very wrong.’

‘That is very good of you, though it shows an excess of charity. It is true, however, that I have never committed murder.’

‘Nor suicide,’ said the widow, lightly. ‘Come, that’s two off the list of your possible delinquencies.’

‘I am not so sure about suicide,’ returned the young man, laughing. ‘There are some people who, if they knew all, would at least accuse me of contemplating it.’

The widow’s face grew grave, and the colour rushed to her cheeks. ‘What people?’ she asked, in a tone of indignation.

‘The world at large; you know what an interest it takes in one’s private affairs.’

‘Yes; how much better it imagines it understands them than oneself,’ she added, contemptuously; ‘for my part I have long learnt to value its opinion at its true worth.’

She took up a leaf that had fallen from the flower-stand on the table and flipped it from her with a finger snap.

‘But, then, my dear Mrs. Beckett, you are above the world. This earthly ball lies at your feet.’

‘And at yours also,’ she said gravely.

‘That is true in a sense, of course, but in a very different sense,’ he rejoined thoughtfully ; ‘young men are always given that comfortable assurance ; but if they kick the ball—or even *at* it—they have often cause to repent of their audacity. What happens to those who “fly in the face of society” is very similar to the fate of those sea-birds who dash themselves to pieces against the lanterns of lighthouses.’

‘That happens from their ignorance,’ observed his companion. ‘They are right enough in seeking for warmth and light. To my mind the real happiness of life lies in comfort.’

‘That is a wide term, my dear Mrs. Beckett. Your ideas of comfort, for example’—he glanced round the room, on the walls of which hung landscapes of Linnell (the widow’s favourite painter), and on whose ceiling glowed the bright hues she loved, arranged with harmonious skill—‘would to some people appear very like luxury.’

‘And why not ? The more of comfort one

has the better. Everything else in the way of enjoyment sooner or later fades. I have experienced it myself, Edgar. You will say, perhaps, "But you are a woman;" I doubt whether that makes much difference in the long-run, but if you think otherwise, ask your uncle. He is a man of the world, and thoroughly understands it.'

'But, my dear Mrs. Beckett,' objected the young man, 'you have called a most damaging witness. Uncle Ralph is a martyr to fashion. His boots and, what is worse, his waistcoats are a size too small for him. He dines out continually—here, for example—where he can get no smoke after dinner, though he pines for tobacco after every meal like the bulbul for its mate; he even goes to evening parties, and from sheer exhaustion—not from dancing (he knows better than that), but from boredom—is driven to partake of bad champagne. Comfort! why, comfort is not more "scorned of devils" than it is by Uncle Ralph.'

'I beg your pardon: he does not scorn it.

On the contrary, he sacrifices himself for the present in the hope of finding himself at last in cotton wool.'

'Indeed,' smiled the young man. 'Well, it may be so; you ladies have sharper eyes than we have.'

'At all events we see further. What I wish to urge upon you is not only to think of to-day, but of to-morrow.'

'Just so; the future,' said Edgar, rising from his chair and pacing the room. It was evident that he had forgotten where he was. 'After the suicide of which we were speaking there is another life.'

'May I ask what was the particular form of self-destruction you were contemplating?' inquired the widow. Her eyes were on the table, her hand was busy with some crumbs that lay before her.

'I cannot tell you that,' replied the young man; 'it would not be fair to others.'

There was a long silence; the widow bit her lip; she looked disappointed, vexed, like

one who has been pursuing the wrong tack ; she was not vexed with her companion, however, for it was in a voice even gentler than before that she once more addressed him.

‘ If I may be allowed to say so, Edgar, you have two great failings—imprudence and indecision. It is about the first I wish to speak to you—that is to say, if you will listen.’

‘ I beg your pardon,’ said the young man, suddenly stopping in his walk, and resuming his seat beside his companion ; ‘ I was lost in thought, and for the moment imagined myself at home.’

‘ It was not such a very great mistake, I hope,’ was the gentle reply.

‘ It was not, indeed,’ replied the other ; ‘ your house has been always, ever since I have had the pleasure of knowing you ’ (it was some eighteen months), ‘ like home ; that is, it isn’t the least like it,’ he added, with ludicrous inconsistency : ‘ Ralph and I live in a garret.’

‘ You are always welcome, always, always,’

continued the widow, earnestly, and without paying attention to this melancholy statement, 'and will ever be so. It is here, above all, that you must come when you need help, Edgar.'

The young man coloured to the roots of his hair; the beautiful path that ran straight up the middle of it looked as if it had been newly gravelled.

'Your advice, I know, has been always most kindly proffered,' he answered evasively, 'and would be most valuable if I only had the sense to take it.'

'Advice, my dear Edgar, is what everybody is willing to give; it costs less than a gas fire and looks as warm and genial; but, though it fills the giver with a virtuous glow, the recipient is often not much the better for it. Now, when I say help, I mean it.'

'I am sure you do,' answered the young man, drawing lines upon the table-cloth with one of his filbert nails, and listening with feverish impatience for the click of the glass door. A

gentle perspiration, such as doctors hail in a feverish patient, bedewed his brow. He was not so much afraid of the widow—indeed, he had a very kindly regard and esteem for her—as he was distrustful of himself. He felt that a crisis was approaching which would compel him to take one of two courses which had long presented themselves to him; he had, in fact, made up his mind which to choose, only decision was abhorrent to him. It was especially abhorrent now, since the course he had determined upon would be unwelcome to his companion. His artist nature shrank from inflicting pain on any one, but especially on himself; his position was really a painful one.

‘A little bird tells me that you had an unlucky day at Ascot,’ said the widow, gently.

‘A blue bird with a white breast, was it not?’ answered the young fellow, forcing a laugh and nodding towards the conservatory. ‘It is the birds of bright plumage that talk the most, though they are not good at singing.’

‘He sings your praises, at all events, you

ungrateful man ; knowing, doubtless, that they are always pleasing to me.'

'You are very good to say so, Mrs. Beckett.'

'Was the sum a large one, may I ask, Edgar, which you so unfortunately ventured?'

Again the colour rushed to the young man's face. 'I am not accustomed to bet more than I can pay,' he answered stiffly.

'That you are not accustomed to do anything dishonourable, Edgar, I am well aware,' was the gentle reply, 'but you are very imprudent.'

'It is my nature,' he returned quickly. 'People talk of "living up" to this and that ; I think I may honestly say that, whatever income I possessed, I should live up to the last shilling of it.'

'Perhaps if you were very rich you would think differently,' said the widow, gravely. 'There is a certain sense of responsibility that attaches to great wealth.'

'I don't think that would oppress me,

whatever else might, in such a case,' answered the young man lightly.

'Then I am afraid you must be naturally extravagant.'

'I *am*,' he replied, with a certain earnest frankness; 'and I resent above all things any check or restraint; that is one of the reasons why I hate Cliffe Park, because it is tied up and I can't get rid of it.'

'But surely, Edgar,' argued the widow, gravely, 'it must be a comfort to feel that something—though it may not be much—is made secure to you in spite of all reverses of fortune.'

'Not a bit of it. If I could sell that wretched place to-morrow, for example, and pay these Ascot debts—not, of course, but that I *can* pay them,' he added hastily, 'from other sources.'

'Just so; only it is inconvenient to part with a few thousands.'

'It would be if I owed them,' returned the

young man, laughing; 'most uncommonly inconvenient.'

'Then your loss is a mere trifle,' remarked the widow, with an involuntary sigh.

'To you it would be a mere flea-bite, my dear Mrs. Beckett,' he replied; 'but to me five hundred pounds is—well, five hundred pounds.'

'You have stated the case quite correctly, Edgar; in a manner, too, that I could not have done, since it would have savoured of ostentation. As this sum is to me "a mere flea-bite," while to pay it is to you a matter of some consequence, will you not allow me—it would be a very great pleasure—to take the privilege of an old friend?'

'My dear Mrs. Beckett, the thing is impossible,' exclaimed the young man, starting to his feet.

'Nay, nay, it is certainly not impossible,' she answered, 'because it is as easy for me to do it, as it is for you to resume your seat.'

He bit his lip, but took the chair which she pushed gently towards him.

‘ There is nothing to be offended at, surely, Edgar. When we posted to Virginia Water the other day, you thought it no humiliation, I suppose, because I paid for the postilions and the turnpikes. This caraffe of water is more than I need, more than I can drink: shall I not fill your glass for you if you are thirsty? Where is the obligation?’

‘ All that is different,’ murmured the young man; ‘ you know it is different.’

‘ Because money, forsooth, is held by foolish persons to be different from everything else. Suppose, then, I were to die to-morrow, and it was found that I had not, as the phrase goes, “forgotten” you: that it was my wish, as it *is* my wish, Edgar, Heaven knows, to make the road of life smooth for you: that I had, in short, left you half my fortune. You would accept it then; but now, when I am alive, and when the knowledge of my having conferred some benefit upon you would give me pleasure—the greatest pleasure, perhaps, of which my mind is capable—you reject it; you spurn it.’

‘Pardon me, dear Mrs. Beckett, I do not spurn it, I appreciate your generosity exceedingly; and if I hesitate, it is not so much on my own account, believe me.’

‘Nay, nay,’ she interrupted haughtily, ‘I cannot admit that plea. I am old enough—I mean I have had experience enough of life, Edgar, to be fully capable of taking care of my reputation. I know my position thoroughly; what the world thinks of me I care not; what it will dare to say of me is not much. They are coming in’ (she looked towards the glass door). ‘There is no time to speak further on this matter; reflect upon it; turn it over in your mind.’

‘I will.’

‘In the meantime I will write to you——What, Mary, only a common rose for Mr. Dornay, after all this time spent in choosing it!’

‘A common rose, madam,’ said Uncle Ralph, with a bow and a smile, ‘like common honesty and common sense, is not so very common; and, moreover, it stands for True Love, which is rarer still.’

CHAPTER V

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

It seems to have escaped the notice of those social teachers who are so good as to point out to their fellow-creatures how to get on in the world, how great a factor in that matter, sometimes for good, more often for evil, is rapidity of action caused by the hatred of suspense. It is not exactly impatience, the 'raw haste' which the poet describes as 'half-sister to delay,' but the desire to know the worst or the best. Though most frequently found in impulsive natures, it is not peculiar to them. One of the most methodical men of his time, and the most successful in his calling of all time, possessed this attribute in excess. On the one hand it caused him never to lose an

opportunity: he 'caught the skirts of happy chance' throughout his life; but on the other he often renounced great gains in order to get a matter settled and off his mind.

Mrs. Beckett, notwithstanding her boasted experience of life, had never learnt to be patient; she had always acted more or less upon impulse, and her vast wealth had increased this tendency. Royal personages do not write when they have a fancy for anything; they telegraph for it, or send a special messenger. We read of Louis XIV. that on one occasion 'he had almost to wait,' but the catastrophe itself was averted.

No sooner had her two visitors departed than the widow was consumed with a desire to despatch that letter to the younger of them of which she had spoken to him. 'In the meantime I will write to you,' she had said, not because she had found speaking difficult, but the getting an answer from him. She felt that he had stood on his guard and parried her thrusts, without absolutely becoming her

antagonist. He had been very careful not to hurt her feelings, whereas if he had quite made up his mind to reject her advances he might have repelled them with a word or two, such as she could have scarcely blamed him for using in self-defence. It was plain to her that he was in a state of indecision : on the one hand well disposed for a life of ease and opulence ; on the other, sensitive to the ridicule that would attach to him for the price he would have to pay for it. She did not dream of having a rival in her affections ; she had never heard a whisper of such a thing ; that view of the case did not occur to her at all, perhaps because she was secretly conscious that affection—on his side at least—was not much concerned in the matter. She knew that Edgar liked her, and persuaded herself that his liking, when he came to know the sacrifices she was prepared to make for him, would turn to love. But in the meantime she could hardly write of the sacrifices ; she could not say, ‘ If you marry me I will settle this and

that upon you absolutely, and make you entirely independent of me.' She was secretly conscious that he had exaggerated his tendency to extravagance and his dislike to all financial control, in order to dissuade her from her purpose; but she ignored it. Her Edgar, if he would be hers, should be as extravagant as he pleased, and have nothing to complain of in the way of restriction. She had fallen over head and ears in love with him.

There was certainly some disparity in their ages, and that on the wrong side; but Edgar looked old for his years, while she looked young, and, what was more, felt so. She had had troubles, severe ones, but they had not broken her spirit; her capacity for affection was as great as ever. In her first marriage she had not looked for love; in her second she had looked in vain for it. It was still, as it were, owed to her, and there was yet time to enjoy it; and even if it were not thoroughly reciprocated, might not her third union be as happy as her first, where reciprocity had also been

wanting, though, in that case, from her own side? At the worst she was convinced, and not without reason, that Edgar Dornay would never treat her ill. For her friends she had arguments enough for taking this step. With her enormous fortune she felt the need of a protector and adviser, &c.; she knew their remonstrances would not be very strong; and as for her enemies, she could afford to defy or to despise them. But the unfolding of her intentions to Edgar himself was a very different matter. Even the simple 'yes' or 'no' required from the blushing maiden whose hand has been asked in marriage is said to be an embarrassing affair. Conceive then what a task lay before the widow, who was herself about to put the question instead of answering it! And she had not even the excuse of a leap-year. It was easy enough to begin 'My dear Edgar,' and to end 'Yours faithfully, Kate Beckett'; the difficulty lay in the intermediate matter.

A snow-storm of torn-up letters went on in

the widow's boudoir before she could compose one to her mind ; if it was not a pretty letter after all, that may be set down to the necessity of the case ; under the circumstances it was perhaps as good a one as could have been written.

MY DEAR EDGAR,—If we had not been interrupted this morning, I had made up my mind to speak to you upon a certain subject about which—for suspense in this matter is intolerable to me—I am now compelled to write. It is a subject so very delicate and difficult for me to touch upon, that I should not venture to do so but for the confidence I feel that I am not only addressing a man of honour, who will respect my secret, but a man of feeling, who will understand what it costs me to reveal it.'

The above sentence was not composed in a hurry. Even when it was written she was dissatisfied with it. She thought the expression 'costs' might remind him inopportunely of her

money. 'It is not usual for ladies to write to gentlemen upon such a topic; my very housemaid would hesitate to give to the young man with whom she "keeps company" that fateful ring (with O. K. K. B. W. P. on it) which she accepts from him with such alacrity; it is a woman's province to wait for her wooer. Unhappily I do not share the common lot. My position is an exceptional one. If I am so fortunate as to have won the affections of an honourable man, certain considerations would seal his lips; and the more worthy he is of being beloved the more closely they would seal them. Ever since I have known you, Edgar, I have been a happier woman' (perhaps it was fortunate that their acquaintance had not been a prolonged one; it would have been *mal à propos* under the circumstances to remind him that she had known him from his childhood). 'Your companionship has cheered me; your intelligence has delighted my mind; and, above all, your heart, or so I have flattered myself, has beaten responsively to mine. Your

behaviour of late, and especially to-day, leads me to believe that a mistaken sense of independence may have kept you silent upon a matter in which your happiness may be, as mine most certainly is, concerned. The inequality of our fortunes may, to one of your sensitive nature, have put a padlock on your tongue. That is foolish, Edgar, for there is an inequality of age between us—ten years or more, I fear' (it was nearer twenty)—'which if this matter were one of bargain, which Heaven forbid, might fairly be written off against it. If a false pride, or an unfounded mistrust, prevents your speaking to me of what is in your heart, I entreat you for both our sakes to discard them. If, on the other hand, I have deceived myself, it is better that I should be undeceived. Your generous heart will forgive a fond and foolish woman who has mistaken regard for love, and a natural kindliness of heart for a particular inclination.

‘Yours faithfully,

‘KATE BECKETT.’

Then came the postscript, which, though it would be cynical to say it contained the pith of the matter, was of considerable importance. ‘Whatever may be your reply to this, I trust you will accept the inclosed; if not as an earnest of the many offices of loving-kindness I hope to do for you, then as a small testimony of what at all events will be a lifelong friendship. I will only add that, instead of being five hundred, I wish it were five thousand.’

Having concluded this remarkable composition, it seemed to the writer that every moment it lay on her table or even in the post-office was lost time; the possibility of the Sunday intervening before Edgar could hear from her was a terrible thought; so she sent the note by hand.

‘Any answer, me lady?’ inquired the tall footman to whom its custody was intrusted.

That she expected an answer we may well imagine, and it was not without an inward struggle that she replied, ‘No; you need only leave the letter;’ she would in truth have

liked the man to have waited in the hall of the Aglaia Club for her correspondent's reply.

When the letter had gone she half regretted not having added another postscript, 'Please acknowledge cheque;' not that she was solicitous about its safety, but that it would have necessitated an immediate response. Nor was this wholly owing to impatience of suspense. If she did not know quite as much about Mr. Edgar Dornay as she thought she did, she was well aware that he was a man of impulse, and that her best chance of carrying his somewhat slackly defended heart was by a *coup de main*.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO TO ONE.

THE withdrawal of Mrs. Beckett to her boudoir was a matter of some surprise to Miss Marvon, for it was not the custom of the elder lady thus to seclude herself. She did not much care for general society, of which she had seen enough and to spare, but she liked companionship, and especially that of her young friend. It seemed, therefore, incumbent on her to offer some sort of explanation for her late seclusion.

‘I have been writing some letters, my dear,’ she said; which was true enough, if twenty copies of one letter constitute a plural.

‘Could I not have helped you, dear Mrs. Beckett?’

‘Well, no; I don’t think you could, my dear.’

There was a tinge of red in the widow’s cheek as she said so, and also a faint smile on her lip, for she was not without some sense of humour. ‘Would it be indiscreet to inquire what you and Mr. Ralph were talking about all that time in the conservatory?’

It was Mary’s turn to blush now.

‘Well, among other things, he was eloquent upon the language of flowers.’

‘Indeed,’ said the widow, smiling. ‘I must take more care of you, Mary. I had no idea that you had made an impression in that quarter.’

‘Nor I,’ answered the other, drily.

‘I am glad you do not take his attentions very seriously, for I am afraid Mr. Ralph is rather a butterfly. However, no one can deny that he is very agreeable, though he always rather reminds me of the poet of whom it was said that he could write lines to a broomstick. He is so very enthusiastic about everything, and at the shortest possible notice.’

Mary, who had been always careful to evince no personal hostility to Uncle Ralph for the very reason she had given to him, was now more chary of her censure than ever. She only smiled adhesion to her companion's sentiments.

‘How Charley hates him!’ continued the widow. ‘It is such a pity.’

‘It is a pity, at all events, that he shows it so,’ observed Mary.

‘No doubt. A young man who has his way to make in the world should not make himself enemies.’

‘Still, Mr. Ralph Dornay tried to snub him.’

‘True. And, as you say, “tried” without altogether succeeding in it. Charley has a cool, quiet way with him, which I have often re-proved, but which I confess not a little tickles me. In a Minister of State it would be admirable, but in a young Government clerk it is very impertinent. What an immense difference social position makes! Supposing a young

man—I don't say Charley, but one like Charley——'

'Upon my word, dear Mrs. Beckett,' interrupted Mary, laughing, 'I don't believe there is one.'

'I am glad to hear you say so, my dear,' said the widow, significantly.

'Oh, I didn't mean anything so very much in his favour,' answered Mary, quietly; 'we were talking of his cool ways. But I am interrupting you; you were supposing a young man.'

'Yes; suppose a young man, I was about to say, equal to Charley in intelligence, though in another line, who should suddenly exchange a moderate position for one of great wealth, what a splendid future would lie before him!'

Mary gave a little shrug of her shoulders.

'That depends, my dear Mrs. Beckett. Of course, as you have just said, his liveliness would pass for wit, and his talents for genius; but the motive for exerting himself would be

taken from him. Being in the lap of luxury, there is a temptation to sit there, and take what the gods provide one in a golden spoon.'

'Yet it would surely be a spur to his ambition to feel that, with the advantages he has become possessed of, almost anything would be within his grasp. In a man of moderate means, however able, the sense of the impossibility of success crushes endeavour. In a general way, you know, I am rather a sentimental person, but, for the reason I have just given, I do not think that clever young men should marry penniless girls.'

'Perhaps not,' said Mary, gravely. 'You presume, however, that the alternative is given them of marrying for money.'

'Let us say marrying money. Why should we say "for" money because a man marries a woman who happens to possess it? Of course there must be the alternative. If Charley, for instance, had had any chance of winning an heiress, I am not sure, my dear, notwithstanding

my high opinion of you, that I should have recommended him to your attention.'

'Then I wish he had had the chance,' said Mary, smiling. She could speak lightly enough of Charley; but some one else had been brought to her mind by her companion's words, of whom she could not so speak. The thoughts of both ladies, without any mutual consciousness of the fact, had been dwelling on the same man. The case Mrs. Beckett had been supposing was that of Edgar Dornay; and it had suggested to Mary whether her encouragement of that young man's attentions might not be an act of selfishness which would smother an honourable ambition, and cut him off from possibilities of greatness. It was a very delicate scruple, for, beyond the recommendation of a change of colour in the decoration of Mrs. Beckett's boudoir, Mr. Edgar Dornay had at present effected no particular intellectual revolution, nor, indeed, accomplished anything which the world would not have willingly let die.

‘I never denied that Charley had his faults, my dear,’ continued Mrs. Beckett, forgetting her *rôle* as advocate of Charley’s cause, and only using him as a perch from which to fly to the subject which was monopolising her mind ; ‘his prejudices, for example, are often as strong as they are groundless. I don’t believe, for example, he likes Edgar himself one bit better than he likes his uncle.’

‘I don’t think he quite understands his character,’ observed Mary, with a show of indifference.

‘He doesn’t give himself the trouble to study it,’ said the widow, vehemently.

‘It ’s a great pity,’ observed Mary, gently.

‘I call it abominable of him,’ continued the widow. ‘The way in which he jumped from his seat when our other visitors entered the room to-day, and murmured something about “another engagement,” was too transparently indecent. One would have thought they had had the small-pox out upon them.’

‘They did interrupt his story, however,’

said Mary, apologetically. Her sympathies were always 'retained for the defence,' and, moreover, she was anxious to turn the conversation from its present topic. She loved to think about Edgar Dornay—indeed, she thought about him whether she would or no—quite as much as her companion; but, unlike her, she was averse to speak about him. 'I confess I was very much interested about the giant at Letcombe Dottrell. What a curious person Mr. Paton must be!'

'Curious is no word for him, my dear. He is as mad about some things as a March hare; but, being so very rich, he is only considered eccentric.'

'But I have always heard he was very benevolent.'

'Well, yes; except in one particular direction. In that respect he is like Howard the philanthropist, who liked everybody except his own flesh and blood.'

'Why, I understood Mr. Paton had no relations!'

‘Nor has he any near ones. But he once had an only son.’ “A little more than kin, and less than kind,” should be the family motto, for they two hated one another like poison.’

‘How shocking!’

‘It was indeed; I don’t know who was to blame for it in the first instance; but the breach grew wider and wider, till there was no bridging it over. At last the son ran away with a young woman very inferior to him in social station—the village organist—which caused a dreadful scandal.’

‘That is the sort of marriage which the world is slowest to forgive,’ sighed Mary, thoughtfully. ‘I suppose the world is right, but it seems very hard.’

‘In this case its forgiveness was not required,’ observed the widow, drily, ‘for they were never married at all. For all that, however, young Henry Paton stuck to the girl in a certain fashion—not that he could have really loved her, for he ill-treated her, and, in the end, deserted her; but he would never marry any

one else. He declined to form an alliance which would have been at least respectable, and on which his father insisted as the basis of their reconciliation. And, last of all, he crowned his enormities (for I assure you they were not mere peccadilloes) by trying to put his father into a lunatic asylum, which he very nearly accomplished.'

'What a terrible history!' exclaimed the girl. 'And is the young man dead?'

'Yes. He was killed in some drunken brawl in New York, and mourned by no one except by his poor mother.'

'She is alive, then?'

'Yes; and as good a woman as ever breathed. Mr. Paton, too, to do him justice, is the kindest of husbands; but he has forbidden her ever to mention her son's name to him. What was at first mere heat against him, in the end turned to hate, so that his very memory is loathsome to him. What is stranger than all, this vehemence of detestation has affected the old man's general views of life. Naturally of a

most tender and sympathising disposition, he will never admit the tie of blood as a motive for affection. He looks upon relations as humourists depict mothers-in-law, while, on the other hand, his great house is full of living objects of benevolence, not always chosen with good judgment. Charley called them, if you remember, "the Happy Family"—poets, painters, inventors, and all the intellectual tagrag and bobtail who are always on the look-out for money and a patron.'

'How very curious! And do you know this Mr. Paton?'

'A little. He had some acquaintance at one time'—here the widow pressed her lips together—'with my second husband. Mr. Rennie has been his man of business for years, and your friend, Mrs. Sotheran, of course, is very intimate at Letcombe Hall, since she lives in the same parish.'

'And yet she has never mentioned to me one word about Mr. Paton,' said Mary; 'I have only heard of him from others.'

‘How curious!—Thanks.’ This to the servant, who had just placed a letter in his mistress’s hand. A glance at the address was sufficient to tell her from whom it came. It was the one she had been expecting with such impatience, but she had certainly no right to complain upon the score of delay. It was not yet dinner time, and her own letter had not been despatched more than two hours. She argued favourably (from what she knew of Edgar’s character) from this prompt reply. At all events, she held in her hand the key of her future happiness, or, let us say, discontent, for misery would certainly be too strong a word.

The moment was a supreme one, but then she was not unaccustomed to such supreme moments. Moreover, as we get on in years, all moments (save that in which death is beckoning to some dear one, true and tried) become less supreme. There was a ‘catch’ in her breath, but her face showed nothing of the anxiety that consumed her. If it had done

so, however, her companion would not have observed it. Her thoughts, attracted for the moment by the sad domestic history to which she had just been listening, had already reverted to more personal affairs—not exactly her own affairs, though her own were bound up in them. Mary Marvon used a very rare—though, among women, a not unexampled—system of notation. With her Number One was *not* always first, and was sometimes naught. She had every reason to believe, short of an actual offer of marriage, that Edgar Dornay proposed to make her his wife. She had liked him—even, perhaps, what is called fallen in love with him—from the first, but she had kept that fact carefully locked up in her own heart. She had given him no sort of encouragement, but had behaved to him exactly as she behaved to Mrs. Beckett's other visitors; not, indeed, with the humility often used by persons in her position, for nature had not fitted her for the conventional *rôle* of a 'companion,' but certainly with no forward

assurance. On the contrary, she had put a constraint upon herself when in his company, and replied to him whenever he had addressed her with studied reticence. He had pushed aside this veil with his own hands, had sought her out, though with no demonstration of manner, in her modest retirement, and had won her heart.

He was not, however, quite sure that he had won it, nor had she quite made up her mind to give it him. Her hesitation arose solely upon his own account. In one point of view—the most common one—she was without doubt a bad match for him. She could give him nothing but her love. Nay, as Mrs. Beckett had just been unconsciously pointing out, she might be not even a *plus* at all, but a *minus*. His union with her might take away from him certain opportunities. They did not present themselves to her in the precise form that they had appeared to her friend; she could not picture the man of her choice marrying for money, but she could understand

that her poverty might be a check upon his advancement in life. His parents were dead, and he had no one but his own wishes to consult in the matter—unless Uncle Ralph might be considered in a paternal light, an idea which she rejected with some contempt. But this very freedom of choice increased her hesitation. It behoved her all the more not to take advantage of this uncontrolled attachment to his own hurt. What the world might say of it would be a very small thing to her in comparison with what her own conscience might say. It did not enter into her consideration at all—what Mrs. Beckett, on the other hand, saw very clearly—that Edgar Dornay was of that impulsive and indecisive nature which needs, above all others, alliance with a firm, unwavering one; that a wife such as Mary Marvon would, in fact, to a young gentleman of his incompleteness be ‘the making of him.’ But, in spite of all her doubts, she had a secret conviction in her heart that she could make him a happy man.

She was not so absolutely ignorant of human nature as to suppose this sort of love was reciprocated, but she believed that Edgar loved her as truly and unselfishly as man could do. It was most fortunate for her hostess that Mary was thus sunk in reflection, for with Edgar Dornay's letter in her hand Mrs. Beckett felt very unequal to conversation. If her young friend had looked up at that critical moment with the very natural observation, for example, 'Who is your correspondent?' one can hardly imagine what would have happened, though it is just possible, I fear, that she might have replied, 'Only a bill, dear,' with the most innocent smile in the world.

Before conversation was resumed, however, the dressing gong began to boom through the house, which afforded her an excuse for retreat with all the honours of truth.

CHAPTER VII.

A FOOL'S PARADISE.

EVEN in the seclusion of her own apartment the widow did not tear open her Edgar's letter and greedily devour it with her eyes ; nor, as a matter of fact, perhaps, is that course of action the usual one in such cases except upon the stage, where one has to consider the conditions of distance—the gallery. In real life such treatment is only applied to telegrams. When a woman, especially, has a *billet-doux* in her hand, or what she hopes will prove one, she is in no hurry, however impatient may be her natural disposition, to become possessed of its contents ; and this is more particularly the case when she has good reason to believe them to be agreeable.

That the cheque had not come back Mrs. Beckett had assured herself by the ordeal of touch ; her delicate fingers had weighed the missive and decided that it was too light to contain an inclosure. If her Edgar had kept the cheque she felt that he was secured to her, or, as brutal MAN would have expressed it, ' sold ' ; for, though she had urged his acceptance of it in any case, she knew that there was in reality no alternative for him.

As she gazed on his handwriting her thoughts reverted to the day, now thirty years ago, when her father had placed a similar letter in her hand with the quiet remark, ' This is from Sir Robert, my darling ; you will do as you please about it.'

How different were her present feelings ! It seemed to her as she compared her ' now ' and ' then ' that she could scarcely be the same woman. Her second offer had been made by word of mouth ; and how differently again had that proposal been received ! With what rapture had she heard it ! With what

promise it had seemed to blossom, and how, alas, that blossom had withered ere it ever grew to bud! She could not conceal from herself that there was no such blossom now; yet if there was less to win—and there *was* less, much less—she on her part had less to lose.

‘My dear Mrs. Beckett,—Your kind letter has affected me beyond measure. I feel I am not worthy of your love, but I hope to become worthy of it. I am compelled to spend to-morrow at Brighton, but I shall be with you at three o’clock on Monday, when I shall trust to find you alone.

‘Ever yours affectionately,

‘EDGAR DORNAY.’

‘N.B.—Cheque received.’

If the letter was not all that the widow could wish, it was without doubt an acceptance of her proposal; if it did not fulfil her expectations, it removed from her all apprehensions of disappointment; nay, it realised her hopes: but she didn’t like his putting off his visit till

Monday. Why should he not have come on Sunday? Even supposing he had a previous engagement for that day, why should he not have cancelled it? Was he not now engaged to *her*? The notion of Mr. Edgar Dornay's having any conscientious scruples concerning Sunday did not, I regret to say, enter into her mind. What, however, she resented a great deal more was Edgar's postscript, 'Cheque received,' which seemed almost to have a double signification for her. Her first act, indeed, was to produce a pair of golden scissors—one of a set of implements fitted into a sea shell, such as Aphrodite might have used at a marine Dorcas Society—and cut that neatly out. The note looked a little shorter, but much sweeter, without that little addition.

Mrs. Beckett had not only overlived her illusions, but had, what very few women possess, a due sense of proportion. She acknowledged to herself that concerning the matter between herself and 'another'—so her dividends expressed it—she had got decidedly

the best of it. If Mr. Charles Sotheran, whom, to do her justice, she would have no more thought of as a husband than of marrying her grandson, had been in the place of Mr. Edgar Dornay, she would have taken a different view of the affair; the obligation would, in that case, have seemed to lie on the other side. His circumstances were such that, to use a homely but very significant expression, he might well have 'jumped at' such an offer. But Edgar Dornay was well born, in possession of moderate means, and had made for himself a certain position in the world. She was not only very pleased that he had accepted her proposal, but grateful. It was impossible for him of course to speak of 'terms,' but she at once resolved that they should be made as much to his liking as possible. Her first idea—the idea of a woman in love, but one which fitted also with the natural generosity of her disposition—was to make him independent of her. And it was not enough for her to tell him her intentions; she wished to be able to

assure him that they were already in process of being carried out. This was a notion that would never of course have entered into the head of a young girl ; but in her case it had a certain pathos in it—it was a tacit confession that she knew she was not loved for herself alone. If the other reason for which he loved her should be strengthened, would he not then love her more ? There was at least nothing sordid in such an act of voluntary munificence.

She dashed off three lines to her man of business, Mr. Rennie, to request his attendance on her after breakfast on Monday morning : ‘ Come to breakfast if you can,’ she added impulsively, ‘ though I am afraid our hour (9.30) will be a little late for you.’ Then she went down to dinner in the highest spirits.

There are some unphilosophic persons who do not much believe in the chastening influence of adversity ; who confess that they are never so unsympathetic as when they are in low spirits, and that melancholy and moroseness are with them synonymous terms. We admire

their candour, but pity the littleness of their minds. Still, it must be acknowledged that when folks are in good luck they are more agreeable as companions than when they are depressed; kindly natures expand under the influence of good fortune, and are very willing that their fellow-creatures should share, or at all events receive the overplus of it. Mrs. Beckett had been always kind to her young companion, but never had she borne herself so warmly towards her as on the present occasion; in the familiarity of their conversation when they had gone up to the drawing-room, she even ventured once more to hint at the subject of Mary's settling in life, though without any direct reference to the husband she had chosen for her.

‘You are very young still, my dear, it is quite true; but age is relative; to a girl of fortune it is of small consequence, but, to one with small means, every year after she becomes marriageable is twelve months lost.’

‘I have never heard the value of time

pointed out with such particularity,' said Mary, smiling.

'My dear, I am quite serious; it is the fact,' returned the widow, earnestly; 'and I need not tell you, Mary, that whomsoever you may choose for a husband—though you know my especial wishes in that matter—I shall take care that you do not go to him without a dowry.'

'You are very good and very kind,' said Mary, with a faint flush; she was used to hints of the widow's intentions towards her which had at first made her very uncomfortable; there was something in her nature which revolted against them, though she had found from experience that it was better to pass them lightly by. 'But unless, my dear Mrs. Beckett, your generosity partakes of the nature of what Mr. Rennie was trying to explain to us the other day, a time bargain, or that you want to get rid of me as soon as possible——'

'Nay, nay,' interrupted the widow, 'you know I don't mean that.' She was conscious,

however—under the new conditions of her life that was to be—of having contemplated Mary's departure as a possibility. No idea of jealousy had crossed her mind, but it had occurred to her that when she became Mrs. Dornay, not only would Mary's office become a sinecure, but that there would be something embarrassing in her presence. In the case of turtle doves, however roomy their nest may be, the happy pair, or the female at all events, prefers it to be free from lodgers. 'My house will always be your home, Mary, but circumstances may alter as regards myself—I may not be in a position—nobody knows what may happen.'

The widow was in a quagmire, in which her struggles to escape only sank her the deeper; she felt she had gone too far in hinting at any alteration in her mode of life, and she did not know how to erase the impression her words might have conveyed.

Mary, however, was quite innocent of all suspicion. She thought Mrs. Beckett was

referring to the uncertainties of human life. 'It will be long indeed, I hope, and have every reason to believe,' she answered earnestly, 'before I need to come to any resolution on that account.'

The widow bit her lip and was silent. It was possible, had Mary given her any encouragement, that she might have made a confidante of her then and there; but under present circumstances that was out of the question. It was certainly very unpleasant that the idea of change in her condition had only associated itself in Mary's mind with her decease. She would take care to let Mr. Rennie understand that she had sent for him with quite other views than to give him her testamentary instructions.

'I know you hate to perform in public, Mary,' she said with some abruptness (it was the one thing in Mrs. Beckett's manner which now and then betrayed the relative positions occupied by Miss Marvon and herself), 'but

since we are quite alone, perhaps you will play something on the piano.'

It was an elastic request, and Mary took full advantage of it, for music was her delight. She played piece after piece, now grave, now gay, and at the end of each the widow murmured, 'That is indeed a treat,' or 'Thank you,' or 'How charming!' But what was played was in fact only the accompaniment, more or less suitable, to her own thoughts.

When Mary's fingers evoked pathos, Mrs. Beckett's mind reverted to her girlhood, so long past and gone; to the simple pleasures of her youth, and to its dreams; which, though great things had befallen her, had been far indeed from being realised. When the strain grew sombre her middle life passed once more before her, haunted by the ghost of love, and shadowed by a hated presence. When the tune was bright and joyous, she painted her future in bright colours, and likened the remainder of her days to an Indian summer.

But as to whether Beethoven was being played, or Mozart, or Chopin, the widow neither knew nor cared, so long as the notes were not so loud as to interfere with her own reflections. And so it is with a good many other people who affect to 'doat on music.'

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. RENNIE'S INSTRUCTIONS.

THE next day was Sunday, a *dies non* ; the day of all days—since in well-regulated establishments no work is permitted—on which suspense is most intolerable. Again and again did Mrs. Beckett congratulate herself that she had taken time by the forelock, and secured her Edgar's reply. How dreadful it would have been to have pictured him at Brighton, ignorant of her devotion to him, and—it was really within the bounds of possibility—flirting with somebody else ! Even as it was, the day was a very long one, and contrary to her custom she went twice to church, not so much, however, with the idea of special thanksgiving as of withdrawing her mind from its

monopolising topic. The preacher was eloquent and fashionable, but it is doubtful whether he succeeded in producing in her that description of meditation which, above all others, should be 'fancy free.'

Contrary to the widow's expectations, Mr. Rennie arrived at the breakfast hour on Monday morning. The lawyer was a man of slight, almost insignificant figure, young for his years, which were verging on sixty; but with an astute and intelligent face. His eyes, blue and keen as a sword blade, like it were kept in scabbard until there was need for them. Their lids were usually pressed so close together that it was a wonder he saw out of them. The habit was ascribed to near-sightedness, an idea which he was very far from wishing to combat. The peculiarity had arisen perhaps in trick, but he had found it useful to him. When he heard things from his clients (and he sometimes did) which would have opened ordinary eyes very wide indeed, they only lifted his lashes a little. Nothing seemed to astonish him. On

the other hand, he sometimes astonished others ; on occasions which demanded their exhibition, some folks knew that he could open his eyes to some purpose, when their effect was that of a policeman's bull's-eye suddenly turned on a detected thief. Mr. Rennie was an old bachelor, and his manners were of the old school of politeness : his behaviour to women, always kindly but mingled with a certain respect, was quite different from the affected devotion displayed to them by men of fashion ; his ways with men were various, but he had a general reputation for something more than mere scrupulous integrity ; a man of honour first and a lawyer afterwards. His business was mainly confined to the affairs of great families, and the administration of large estates ; but he had been known to give valuable advice to persons of comparative insignificance, and, what was more, in a very unprofessional manner—without a fee. Mrs. Beckett adored him, and told him so ; just a little to his alarm. A woman who had buried two husbands was, he thought,

capable of reverting to first principles in the way of matrimony, and of capturing the third by force. But on the whole he liked her ; and not least for her treatment of Mary Marvon. He had seen a great deal of the dependants of the great, and they did not impress him favourably ; but in this young lady he recognised modesty without subservience, and an unflinching self-respect.

‘ This is a compliment indeed, Mr. Rennie,’ were the widow’s first words of welcome. ‘ I never thought you would come to breakfast.’

‘ It is almost as dangerous to give an invitation, madam, under the impression that it will not be accepted,’ was his reply, ‘ as to back a bill under the contrary impression. You seem to have made every preparation, however, for my entertainment.’

‘ There are some cutlets and fish ; oh, I see what you mean ; why, of course there is Mary.’ The lawyer was shaking hands with her with something more than his usual politeness. ‘ I knew you would never dare to take breakfast

with me alone. Under pretence of being my chaperon, or sheep dog, every one knows that Mary is here for the protection of the public.'

'*Quis custodiet?*' murmured the lawyer, with a glance of pity towards the orphan girl.

'What do you say, sir?' inquired the widow, sharply. 'I always suspect the dead languages.'

'I was merely quoting a legal phrase, my dear madam, with reference to the custody of infants. By-the-by, I have been having some correspondence with our friend Mr. Peyton that would surprise you. What do you think of an infant nine feet high?'

'The giant! Oh, we've heard of him!' exclaimed Mary, laughing.

'Well, he's a minor, and since it was through Mr. Peyton's advice that he threw up his engagement, my client thinks he is responsible for his future. As he shakes the pillars of domestic peace at the Hall—and, indeed, the Hall too—it has become necessary to place him somewhere else, and I have been offering

premiums to proprietors of travelling shows to take him. Never was a respectable family solicitor placed in such a false position.'

'The mention of Mr. Rennie's profession, Mary,' observed the widow, 'which nobody, I am sure, would ever guess, unless he referred to it——'

'Now, do you really expect me to take that as a compliment, Mrs. Beckett?' interposed the lawyer.

'The mention of his profession,' continued the widow, 'reminds me that he has come here professionally, and that I must deny myself the pleasure of your company this morning; but you can have the carriage, of course, as usual.'

'Thank you, dear Mrs. Beckett, but I had much rather walk.'

'Then take Simmons with you, I beg, my dear: you are much too young and pretty to go without a maid.'

'I would much prefer Alexander,' said Mary.

'Now did you ever know such a girl, Mr.

Rennie?' exclaimed the widow, appealingly. 'She prefers walking to driving, and the company of Alexander to that of Simmons.'

'It depends upon who Alexander is,' observed the lawyer, judicially. 'If he's an attractive young man——'

'It is a dog, my dear sir; it's Mr. Beckett's old St. Bernard.'

'Oh, indeed! One of those animals who go about with a bottle of Chartreuse—no, by-the-by, that's the other monastery—of brandy round their necks, and save people in the snow. In winter a most admirable companion, but in summer I should have thought——'

'He is charming at all times,' laughed Mary, rising from her seat; 'I've not had a walk with him for weeks, so that we shall have lots to say to one another.'

And with a pretty curtsy and a pleasant smile she left the seniors to their conversation.

'That's a good girl, I'm sure,' observed the lawyer, when the young lady had left the room.

‘An excellent girl,’ assented Mrs. Beckett, warmly ; ‘she is quite like a younger sister to me.’

‘Without the little jealousies and antagonisms which relations sometimes give rise to, eh ?’ observed Mr. Rennie, slyly.

‘Upon my word, you’re as bad as Mr. Peyton,’ exclaimed the widow. ‘I suppose that is why you lawyers get such a bad character : you mix with such queer clients and catch their complaints.’

‘Yes, that’s it. We go about doing good at all risks.’

‘Well, I want you to do some good to-day, or rather to put me, as your client, in the way of doing it. I particularly wish to benefit a certain person—who shall remain nameless, if you please, for the present—pecuniarily. I wish that person, though closely connected with me, to be made independent of me, no matter what may happen as regards change of circumstances, or even of feeling in myself.’

‘A very generous proposition,’ observed

the lawyer, stirring his tea, and thinking to himself, 'Now she is going to provide for that young girl. A very good thing too. Companionship is no inheritance, and one woman's affection for another is never to be depended on; though it looks as firm as the solid earth, there is always a possibility of a landslip.'

As Mrs. Beckett remained silent, he looked up at her through his screwed-up eyes and nodded encouragement. The widow was blushing, and pursuing a peach stone across her plate with a trembling finger—a sign of embarrassment which by no means astonished the lawyer. People, in his experience, were generally more ashamed of their benevolent intentions, especially if they were of a Quixotic character, than of their revenges.

'A highly laudable idea,' he continued, 'if one is only assured, which, no doubt, you are in this case, of the worthiness of the individual to be benefited.'

'I have every confidence in the person in

question, Mr. Rennie. Perhaps, without beating about the bush, it may be as well to state to you, of course in the strictest confidence, that the person I have in my mind is my future husband.'

For the moment Mr. Rennie forgot his office and even himself. He opened his eyes to their fullest extent, not in reproof, as usual, but in sheer amazement.

'Alexander has gone out with Miss Marvon,' said the widow, severely.

'Alexander, my dear madam?' stammered the other.

'Yes—the dog. I thought you whistled, sir.' And, indeed, it was true that the least ghost of a whistle had somehow escaped from the old lawyer's lips.

'Good heavens, madam! nothing was further from my thoughts. It is no whistling matter.'

'So I should hope,' returned the widow, implacably; she was very much offended.

'Thank heavens, it isn't me; that's one

comfort,' was the lawyer's reflection, which assisted him in summoning a gentle smile.

'If I have exhibited any amazement, my dear Mrs. Beckett,' he said, 'it was from the consideration of your great courage and confidence in human nature.'

'I think I am old enough to know my own mind, Mr. Rennie.'

'I don't know as to that. A woman, they say, is as old as she looks, in which case I must needs doubt your judgment.'

'I am glad you have something civil to say at last.'

'Civil! My dear Mrs. Beckett, you must be well aware that my feelings towards you are not those of a mere acquaintance, or even such as should exist between lawyer and client.'

'You would not have dared to say that ten minutes ago,' smiled the widow, who had by this time recovered, not only her self-possession, but her good-humour; from which it may be gathered that she was not absolutely impervious to flattery.

‘Well, I dare to say it now; and something more. On one occasion, when I had had the opportunity of being of service to you, you were graciously pleased to call me your guardian.’

‘I went further, and said “guardian angel,”’ put in Mrs. Beckett, frankly, but with a tinge of colour. He was referring to a certain time when his advice had restrained her from placing what would have been a most ill-judged confidence in her late husband.

‘As your friend and well-wisher, at all events,’ pursued the lawyer, modestly, ‘it is my duty now to point out to you that your position is a very exceptional one. The gentleman you have in your mind you will make not only your husband, but a prince consort.’

‘And how do you know that he is not a prince already?’ inquired the widow, smiling.

The question was a little embarrassing, for the man Mr. Rennie had in his mind was certainly not a prince, nor at all like one, being in

fact no other than Mr. Ralph Dornay. He knew that he was intimate at the house, and thought him just the sort of calculating humbug to have learnt the length of Mrs. Beckett's foot.

‘If he had been a prince I think you would have called him a personage and not a person,’ returned the lawyer, dexterously.

‘He is a prince to me,’ said the widow, gently; ‘to us women all men seem so while they are our lovers.’

‘I suppose they do,’ observed the lawyer, drily. He was considering whether, even to his betrothed, Mr. Ralph Dornay could appear to possess any princely attributes.

‘This is a matter, Mr. Rennie,’ continued the widow, stung by his cynical tone, ‘in which I have no need of advice, except professionally. My mind is quite made up as to the main question.’

The lawyer bowed, and took a pinch of snuff; it was the only vice of which he had ever been accused—or at least convicted.

‘ I am here, my dear madam, to obey your instructions. You wish, as I understand, that this fortunate gentleman should enjoy a handsome life interest in your estate.’

‘ That is of course. It is the usual arrangement, is it not? ’

‘ It is a common one, but by no means without exception. In such a case as yours, a woman’s fortune is settled upon her and her children, but, if she wishes it, a sufficient income is reserved to her husband should he survive her.’

‘ Well, you can draw up the settlement; but I wish a certain sum to be given absolutely to my husband on the day of our marriage; fifty thousand pounds.’

‘ My dear Mrs. Beckett!’

‘ Such are my wishes; be so good as to embody them in—I don’t know how to express myself technically—but I know what I want to have done.’

Mr. Rennie smiled as though he had no doubt of that.

‘I suppose as regards the lump sum a deed of gift will be necessary?’ continued the widow.

‘Not at all. There will be certain preliminary arrangements, and then you have only to sign a cheque.’

The widow’s eyes sparkled with pleasure. To place a cheque for 50,000*l.* in the hands of her intended would be, she felt, an enormous pleasure to her.

‘A draft of your instructions shall be prepared for your approval,’ resumed the lawyer, who had no intention of precipitating matters. ‘Is there anything—or any one else—you wish to mention?’

Since cheques for 50,000*l.* were flying about, it struck the kind-hearted lawyer that Mary Marvon might well be brought to his client’s remembrance before Mr. Ralph Dornay came into his kingdom, after which her chance would be small indeed.

‘No,’ said the widow, thoughtfully. ‘Nothing else occurs to me. You will not be long

about it, I conclude ; it is all so very simple.'

'Very,' assented the lawyer, without moving a muscle ; but his eyes, if he had been so foolish as to open them, would have betrayed the satire.

'Then it could be done at once, in half an hour?'

'What? The deed? The settlement?' The idea of despatch is to a lawyer always hateful ; but the suggestion of tying-up a property like Mrs. Beckett's—as if it had been a brown-paper parcel—in half an hour, sounded to Mr. Rennie like a blasphemy in the ears of a bishop.

'I don't mean that, but I should like to have a note of my intentions drawn out in a proper manner, for my own satisfaction.'

'What she means,' said the lawyer to himself, 'is for private exhibition. She thinks it will bring the tears into the eyes of that specious humbug, whereas it will only make his mouth

water. My dear madam, what a fool you are about to make of yourself! It is curious when Nature has done her very best almost in that way, how some folks will improve upon it.' Then he added aloud, 'You shall have a note of your instructions before your luncheon hour, Mrs. Beckett.'

He named that time because he felt sure that if the man she had in her mind was Mr. Ralph Dornay he would come to lunch; but he was not quite certain that he *was* the man. A curiosity very foreign to his character impelled him, as he took his leave, to learn her secret.

'I suppose it would be indiscreet in me, dear Mrs. Beckett, to hazard a guess as to the subject of our conversation this morning?'

'It would be indiscreet in me to tell,' said the widow, smiling, which, indeed, considering that no word of love had passed her Edgar's lips, it certainly would have been.

'If I was to say that the name of the

unknown began with a D and ended with a Y, should I be very far wrong ?’

‘ You would be getting “ warm,” sir, as the children say at “ hide and seek,” ’ returned the widow, blushing. ‘ I need say no more than that.’ And she held out her hand.

Mr. Rennie took and pressed it kindly, but he did not utter one word of congratulation. He thought his client very foolish ; but also that she was about to bring upon herself a greater punishment than her folly deserved.

Mrs. Beckett was well satisfied with his silence ; in a case like hers she knew enough of the world to be grateful for small mercies. It was something—nay, it was a good deal—that so old a friend and adviser had not dropped a word about the disparity of years. She had not the faintest suspicion of the cause which made any such remarks an impossibility. Her mind was full of her Edgar, and she concluded that of Mr. Rennie was preoccupied with the same individual. If she had told him the truth, it is probable that the lawyer would have known

better than to attempt remonstrance, but a certain line in the Table of Forbidden Degrees in the Prayer Book would certainly have suggested itself—‘A man may not marry his grandmother.’

CHAPTER IX.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

THE Aglaia in Piccadilly is one of those luxurious establishments for the suppression of marriage called clubs, which lets its upper floor in apartments to members. Those who are so fortunate as to secure them need never step out of doors in search of domestic comfort. After eating and drinking and smoking—nay, even reading, if their tastes are so exceptional as to lead them to literature—a pass key opens a private door for them on the second floor, and they have only to go up to bed. ‘Home is home, no matter how homely,’ and the sitting-room and two bedrooms rented by the Messrs. Dornay, uncle and nephew, above their club, were as much their home as though they pos-

sessed a house in the neighbouring square. Indeed, as to decoration, these three apartments were by no means homely, while the sitting-room was furnished with great luxury. Some of the treasures of Cliffe Park, too precious to be left to the tender mercies of tenants, had been imported into it, and the taste of Mr. Edgar Dornay had supplied whatever had been wanting to its original embellishment.

To the ordinary eye, however, nothing would have seemed to be wanting, from Cliffe Park or anywhere else, for the Aglaia Club, though the beauty of its architecture was disputed (and what is *not* disputed in architecture?), was famous for its fittings. Everything was so mellow and subdued and harmonious, that, if mellowness and subjugation and harmony can effect one half of what is ascribed to them upon the human soul, all the members of the Aglaia Club would have been as sure of paradise as a Crusader who had killed a Paynim, or *vice versâ*. On the other hand, notwithstanding

these elegant surroundings, these gentlemen could scarcely be set down as spiritually minded, nor indeed did they concern themselves much with paradise at all. They were mostly golden, or, more accurately, gilded youths, who resembled lilies less in their purity than in their exemption from toil: for, when folks are idle, it is my firm conviction that not all the sage-green furniture in the world will keep them out of mischief.

In some cases these gilded youths were not very youthful, and in others they had rubbed some of their guilt off.

Mr. Ralph Dornay suffered from both these disadvantages more than people were generally aware of, for, to do him justice, he was a man of courage; nay, of dauntless audacity, and could hold his head up like a man where another would have held it down through consciousness of not being worthy of that title; one of great resource and of some ingenuity, fit to breast the blows of circumstance and grapple with his evil star if Fate so willed it, and very

apt to take advantage of his opportunities when she chanced to be in a better humour.

Sometimes he even made opportunities for himself. A great idea had been shaping itself in his mind of late, or, rather, had suddenly been born there, perfected and complete, as Pallas sprang from the brain of Jove. It was a magnificent conception, the result of which might place him above the aspirations of ambition, but one that was proportionally difficult to carry out. It was not only that there were obstacles in the way, huge as a mountain and as solid, but that his plan required a total change of front in his own views and proceedings. Hitherto he had been a mere satellite of his nephew, content to shine with a very modest lustre in the same firmament, and, upon the whole, a faithful satellite. His best advice, according to his lights, had been always at Edgar's service, and in some things he had given him material aid, not, indeed, from affection, nor even from that tie of blood on which he so much insisted, but because their interests

were identical. But now he had it in his mind to be no more a satellite, but a sun, with a system of its own. At present, however, as regarded the attainment of his object he had no system whatever, but only an audacious and well-nigh desperate resolve; it was necessary to feel his way, and with all the more caution since on some portion of it he would have to retrace his steps.

It was the evening of the day on which Edgar Dornay had accepted Mrs. Beckett's offer, and uncle and nephew were alone together in their private apartment. They had not met since they had lunched together in Park Lane, the younger man having dined out, and the elder at the club, as was usual in both cases. The former had donned his dressing-gown and slippers, but the latter was in full evening panoply. Uncle Ralph was not often seen in dishabille—not because that process of 'breaking up' had by any means begun with him with which most of us, when our ship is no longer classed A1, are acquainted, and which

men are often quite as solicitous to conceal as are the softer sex—but because he felt the danger, at his age, of once giving way to slovenly habits. He was as fond of ease as most people—nay, fonder—but in his present circumstances he did not consider that he could afford to take it. His attire, though quite as faultless and more equable—he was never seen in dittos even in September—was not so splendid as that of some members of the Aglaia, and, remembering, perhaps, the dictum of the poet—

What are myrtles and wreaths to the brow that is wrinkled?—he seldom had a flower in his buttonhole. On the present occasion, however, he wore a sprig of stephanotis, which attracted his companion's attention.

‘What! two flowers in one day in your coat, Ralph! You must be going to be married.’

‘The first one, my dear Edgar,’ returned Uncle Ralph, slowly expelling the smoke of his cigar from his lips, and nodding towards the

mantelpiece, on which Mary's rose was blushing in a wine-glass as though ashamed of the association, 'can hardly be considered my own; I look upon it as having been given in trust.'

'How so?' inquired the other, with a tinge of colour in his cheek, which did not escape his companion's notice.

'Well, I hardly think Miss Marvon would have given me anything of her own free will. Moreover, her choice was peculiar. You know the signification of the common rose, no doubt?'

'I heard you say it was "true love,"' said Edgar, with a touch of incredulous contempt.

'That was to spare your feelings. 'It's true meaning is "Love's Ambassador." If you yourself are not learned in the language of flowers, Miss Marvon is, you may depend upon it.'

'I don't believe Miss Marvon ever gave her attention to anything so foolish,' said Edgar, with irritation.

‘You ought to know best,’ returned the other, shrugging his shoulders. ‘I admit that there is as little doubt of her sagacity as of her beauty; but she is a woman, and, being so, must needs have her little weaknesses.’

‘You have insisted upon them often enough, and called them by a worse name,’ remarked his companion, drily.

‘Yes, I own I have been prejudiced, but, really, her sweetness and gentleness made a convert of me this afternoon. *Peccavi.*’

‘What the devil do you mean?’ exclaimed the young man, sharply. ‘Why, it was only the other day you told me her tongue was like a whip.’

‘So it was—to me. But when she speaks of some one else who bears the same name, it is a privilege to listen to her. Her lips drop honey. As for me, I fairly threw down my arms to-day, and owned myself vanquished. “I confess, my dear Miss Marvon,” I said, “that hitherto I have been in opposition to you, but henceforth I am your ally; you may rely

on me to advance your interests and your wishes in every way in my power.”’

‘And what did she say to all that?’

‘I had hoped you would not have asked me,’ said Uncle Ralph in an injured tone; ‘she told me that she had no confidence whatever in my protestations, and that as for my alliance, she didn’t care one halfpenny whether I was her ally or her enemy—or words to that effect.’

‘A brave girl, an honest girl!’ murmured the young man, admiringly. ‘Dear, dear,’ he sighed, ‘what a happy world this would be if one could only do as one liked in it!’

‘Now really, Edgar, you astonish me!’ returned the other with raised eyebrows. ‘I should have thought that was the very condition under which you had accepted existence. May I ask what you have ever done that you didn’t like?’

‘Well, for one thing, I lost five hundred pounds at Ascot.’

‘True,’ replied Uncle Ralph, sententiously;

‘that was certainly a miscarriage of justice. Still it is not an overwhelming misfortune.’

‘You would have found it deucedly inconvenient, Ralph, if it had happened to *you*.’

To this observation, as being absolutely indisputable, Uncle Ralph made no reply. ‘As to the turf,’ he observed, ‘whether one has fifty pounds a year or fifty thousand, the end is the same to everybody who goes in for it. If you would only resolve to give up betting, my dear Edgar, every other pleasure would lie within your grasp. You have a very tolerable income. Although I have often advised you to marry money, I am not sure whether in your case an economical wife without a dowry would not in the end be cheaper to you than a rich one who had been brought up—as they all are—in habits of extravagance. It is not as if you would have to live on bread and cheese.’

‘This is quite a new view of affairs!’ said Edgar, scornfully.

‘I know it; I have confessed as much, and how I have been converted. Moreover, this

Ascot business put *this* in my mind : perhaps if my nephew married the girl he loved, and who will be absolutely dependent on him, he would consent to give up for her sake a dangerous habit, which he will never forego for his own. With her he is secure of happiness if he will only be content with that ; and how few of us are able to look forward to such a future.'

'How strange it is,' returned the other with quiet scorn, 'that a man of your age, Uncle Ralph, and who knows that it is deadly to you, *will* continue to take champagne at dinner, and such lots of it.'

A quick, uneasy smile flitted over his companion's face. 'No, Edgar, I am quite sober, and very serious ; nay, in sackcloth and ashes. I am afraid I have done mischief to you through meaning well. In one matter, at least, and a most important one, I have hitherto used what little influence I may be so fortunate as to have with you for evil and not for good. It is not pleasant to have to eat one's words, but I

believe I have been all wrong about Miss Marvon.'

'Your repentance, like that of most people, Uncle Ralph,' replied the young man, gravely, 'comes a little too late.'

'How so? How can it be too late?' put in the other quickly; 'why, it is not six hours ago since Miss Marvon herself——'

'Very likely,' interrupted the young man, with a forced smile; 'but to the other party interested—the humble individual who is now addressing you—something has happened within those same six hours. In point of fact, my dear fellow, I am going to be married to Mrs. Beckett.'

Uncle Ralph's cigar dropped from his lips, and lay unheeded where it fell on the delicate carpet.

'Impossible! Incredible! You cannot be really serious, Edgar?'

'It is true as I sit here. It need not astonish you so far as the widow is concerned. I am not so vain, or so base, as to boast of such things,

but you must surely have observed that she had a *tendresse* for me.'

'A *tendresse*! I know of course she liked you—looked upon you with maternal affection.' Edgar shook his head and screwed up his mouth; then, observing the look of genuine disgust on his companion's face, he burst out into a peal of laughter.

'If it's a joke,' said Uncle Ralph, 'I'll laugh with you, Edgar, and welcome. If you really mean that you are thinking of marrying Mrs. Beckett——'

'I am not thinking of it, I *have* thought of it,' put in the other, 'and I am going to do t.'

'Then you're going to disgrace yourself, Edgar, and the honour of the family.'

'As to the family, Uncle Ralph,' was the quiet reply, 'I know no one belonging to it, except yourself, for whose opinion I care one farthing.'

'There are the Dead, Edgar,' answered the other, impressively; 'your long line of illus-

trious ancestors are not, I hope, to be put altogether out of account.'

'What a marvellous humbug you are, Ralph! You are like the cardsharper, who through long practice could deceive himself in his own looking-glass, when practising his sleight-of-hand tricks. From continually maundering about the Dornay blood you have got to persuade yourself that there is something in it different from that of other people.'

'I venture to think there is,' returned Uncle Ralph.

'Very good; stick to your theory, for all I care; but don't try to force it down the throat of your connections, who know better. Keep it for the general public. And another thing I must request of you—not to talk to me about my disgracing myself. I am the best judge of my own actions and intentions, and I will submit to neither reproof nor dictation from any human being.'

The young man had risen from his chair, and, striding from one end of the room to the

other, delivered these words with much fire and fury.

‘If I said disgrace, Edgar, I withdraw the word,’ said the other, gently; ‘my affection and respect for you must be my excuse for my warmth of expression. What I shrank from was the contemplation of such self-sacrifice. That you, with your social position, your talents, your youth, should thus throw all your advantages to the winds; it is pitiful, my dear Edgar, it is pitiful!’

Uncle Ralph regarded his nephew with the same sort of regretful admiration that an aunt might entertain for a niece who had announced her intention of becoming an old man’s darling. ‘So young, so fair,’ he seemed to be saying to himself, ‘how is it possible that you can thus sell yourself to this comparatively ancient personage?’

‘I have very good reasons for the step I am about to take,’ said Edgar, mollified in spite of himself by this high estimate of his personal value.

‘Thirty thousand of them per annum,’ suggested Uncle Ralph, drily. ‘Still there is a saying that one may buy even money too dearly. And it won’t be *your* money, to do what you like with, my poor fellow.’

‘That is my affair, Ralph; though indeed I have every confidence in Mrs. Beckett’s consideration and generosity.’

‘Still it is more than likely that her hands are tied.’

‘Nonsense; it is well known that Mrs. Beckett has entire control of her income. Not that *I* should want that, as her late husband did, Heaven knows. The man was a greedy, ill-conditioned brute.’

‘Oh, I don’t question that she will find you a much more agreeable consort,’ put in Uncle Ralph. ‘There is not the least fear of your suffering from any unpleasant comparisons. But what was Mr. Beckett’s happy fate as respects finance may not be yours. Sir Peter may have left his widow free to marry once, but not a second time.’

‘Pooh ! that ’s ridiculous.’

‘Nevertheless, before committing yourself it would be worth while to look at Sir Peter’s will. If it ’s too much trouble, just ask young Sotheran, who is at the Probate Office, to look the thing up.’

‘Sotheran be hanged !’ exclaimed Edgar. The irritation in his tone did not escape the keen ear of his companion, who had by this time recovered both his equanimity and his cigar.

‘Just as you please, my dear boy ; but if I were in your place I would do nothing in a hurry in this matter. There is plenty of time before you at all events.’

‘The matter is done, Ralph. The widow ——’ Here he stopped, for, with all his faults, Edgar Dornay was too much of a gentleman to expose a woman who loved him to ridicule, as would certainly have been the case had he told the true story of his engagement. ‘I have already proposed to Mrs. Beckett, and have had the good fortune to be accepted.’

‘Not in writing, Edgar?’ inquired the other, eagerly. ‘Surely not in writing?’

‘Yes, in writing.’

‘I never heard of anything so ill-judged and infatuated in my life,’ cried Uncle Ralph, taking his handkerchief from his breast and passing it across his face. There was no doubt about the genuineness of his emotion; though he did not shed tears, the dew was literally upon his face. ‘How could you, *could* you, thus wreck all your prospects in life?’

‘One would think I was a novice taking the veil,’ observed Edgar, grimly. ‘Your tone and manner would scarcely be justified if I were a boy of twenty and Mrs. Beckett were threescore years and ten.’

‘But what on earth could have induced you to do it, my poor Edgar?’

‘Well, I acted from mixed motives; it was done on the spur of the moment.’

‘Ah! you were intoxicated by the contemplation of her charms!’

‘You will be so good as to remember,

Ralph,' observed the young man sharply, 'that we are speaking of my future wife.'

'True. Pardon me. The whole thing is so like a dream—a nightmare—that I forgot it was reality. But what was the reason of this sudden resolve of yours? Was it gratitude?'

'Possibly—that is to say, in part.'

'She has laid you, then, under some pecuniary obligation. Oh, Edgar, Edgar, why did you not come to me?'

'What would have been the good of it? You couldn't have given me a cheque for five hundred pounds, I suppose; and how were my Ascot debts to be settled?'

'Five hundred pounds! Do you mean to say you have sold yourself for five hundred pounds?' Uncle Ralph started to his feet with a speed of which one would have supposed him incapable. He drew a key from his pocket, opened his desk, and, taking out his banking book, pitched it into his nephew's lap. 'I have more than two thousand pounds there, as you can see for yourself, only await-

ing investment, to which you are as welcome, my lad, as flowers in May.'

'You are very kind, most kind, Ralph,' said Edgar, gently; 'perhaps if I had known about it before I might have been your debtor. I had thought you were as hard up—at least for ready money—as myself.'

Uncle Ralph looked a little embarrassed; he had certainly not sought the reputation of being the sort of man who has two thousand pounds lying idle at his banker's.

'I kept the money there for a purpose which no longer exists,' he explained, 'for an emergency that has passed away. Pray take it, or what you need of it.'

'It is too late,' answered Edgar, with a sigh. 'Mrs. Beckett would, indeed, have a right to complain of me if I withdrew my offer because the necessity which impelled me to make it had ceased to exist. Indeed, I am wrong to speak of necessity in the matter; I again repeat that I had mixed motives. I like Mrs. Beckett very much.'

‘I am afraid, my dear Edgar, that there is another woman who, in the event of this mad marriage, will also have a right to complain.’

‘You didn’t think so yesterday,’ returned the young man scornfully.

‘Yes, I did, yesterday afternoon, when I heard her speaking about you unreservedly for the first time. Poor, dear Miss Marvon!’

Edgar Dornay’s brow grew very dark.

‘You, at least,’ he answered vehemently, ‘have no right to taunt me about Miss Marvon; nor will I listen to another word as regards my conduct towards her from your lips. It is enough to feel that one has behaved dishonourably, without being preached at by those who are no better than ourselves.’

To this somewhat pointed remark a slight elevation of his broad shoulders was all the reply that Uncle Ralph ventured to make.

‘We shall meet at breakfast to-morrow morning, I conclude,’ he said as he lit his bedroom candle.

‘No; I breakfast out.’

‘In Park Lane, I suppose?’

‘No; I shall not make my appearance there till Monday, at three o’clock.’

He did not think it necessary to mention that he was going to Brighton on the morrow till Monday, and would be out of the reach of his companion’s arguments for the next six-and-thirty hours.

As Uncle Ralph opened his bedroom door he turned and said, with a slight smile, ‘There is somebody who will say of this that “it is an ill wind that blows nobody good.” Mr. Charles Sotheran—or Charley, as Miss Marvon calls him—will now have the field all to himself.’

‘Mary will never marry Sotheran,’ cried Edgar, vehemently.

‘Why not?’ inquired Ralph with simplicity.

‘Because — because — why, because, of course, she doesn’t care for him.’

‘Nay; you mean that at present she would not marry him because she doesn’t care for him

so much as for you. If No. 1 marries some one else, of course she will fall back on No. 2. However, that is her affair, and one of very small consequence in comparison with other matters. Good-night, my dear fellow.'

Having shot that Parthian shaft, Uncle Ralph closed his bedroom door. If what happened to Mary, inclusive even of her possible union with Charley, was of small consequence to the speaker, it seemed to be of some moment to his nephew. His lips were absolutely pale with rage, and he muttered words concerning the probate clerk which, if set down in a will, would have invalidated it, as evidencing madness in the testator. No argument which Uncle Ralph had hitherto hit upon had had such weight with him as that parting arrow loosed at random. It had gone home to the young man's very heart, and the barb was rankling in the wound.

CHAPTER X.

‘I SUPPOSE IT MUST BE “YES.”’

SOME apology seems owing that so very prominent a member of the Park Lane household as the Emperor Alexander has not as yet been introduced to the reader. But the fact is, his title, through the affability of his manners, had long fallen into desuetude, and of late years—that is, since the death of his late master—he had been confined to the ground-floor apartments, and was seldom seen. The dog, a magnificent St. Bernard, had been a great favourite with Mr. Beckett—almost the only creature besides himself, I think, which that tippling civil engineer had any regard for; and in his time he had wandered over the house at will. Nothing was further from his mind than

mischief; one look at his thoughtful eyes and massive head would have convinced you he was incapable of it; but in the drawing-room, crowded as it was with costly nick-nacks, he did with his colossal tail a good deal of involuntary damage. The 'Brush system,' as Charley said, is an admirable one if you only have it under control; but this was not the case with that of Alexander. It worked incessantly, and with great power, but to no useful purpose. On the contrary, it was destructive. Like his great namesake of old, his path was marked with devastation, but, unlike the Imperial Madman, he meant no harm. How could the poor animal know what was going on behind him?

His heart, like his frame, was a noble one; there was but one blot in his character—fidelity to his former master. This, however, was an error of race; the dog is to be won by fear, but the cat never—a circumstance which, if there were no other cogent reasons for it, would always place the cat above the dog in my

opinion. So far, however, as his lights could guide him, Alexander was perfection. His mistress was rather set against him, as she averred, because of his behaviour towards her blue china, though I suspect that was not the real explanation of her coldness; but Mary Marvon adored him, and her affection was reciprocated. She liked nothing better than a walk in the Park with Alexander for her sole companion; he enjoyed it equally, and when once his first manifestations of delight, which resembled the gambols of some hairy elephant with his trunk at the wrong end of him, were over, in a no less sober fashion. Instead of being the ‘ off and on companion of her walks,’ as Wordsworth’s dog was, he stuck to her like Una’s lion, and would not have deserted his charge even to fight a unicorn. As to other dogs, he ignored their very existence. He never made any excursions of curiosity into the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdoms, but trotted by her side with a majestic slouch, deaf to every call but that of duty. If another

dog forced itself on his attention—a very rare occurrence except with bull-dogs—he never bit them, nor so much as opened his mouth; he literally fell upon them and crushed their breath out. Those who had any pride left in them accounted to their friends for their flattened condition by ascribing it to a steam roller.

On the morning of Mr. Rennie's visit, Mary Marvon and her four-footed friend took their way across the Park to the Serpentine. It was their favourite walk; Mary enjoyed the brightness and beauty of the scene, liked to see the children sailing their toy boats, and feeding the ducks, and all the stir of innocent enjoyment. The Emperor Alexander took a gracious interest in the water-dogs, and had a secret curiosity, which his sense of dignity forbade him to gratify, to discover if they were web-footed. Mary's pet standpoint—for she always lingered a minute there—was the bridge by Kensington Gardens, which has a view to northwards equal in beauty and superior in extent to that

from the bridge in St. James’s Park ; to the south there is a still finer prospect, if the eye can only avoid that equestrian image (now removed) of the Duke of Wellington, which makes one wish that Fame were indeed a bubble, and could evanesce without enduring brass. She is gazing now on the shining water and the stately trees, but her heart is far from them. She has only to say one little word, as she believes, and it will be further still—in another’s keeping.

With young ladies of the present day—those, at least, who permit themselves to love at all, who are said to be in a minority—it is the fashion, as Douglas did with the heart of Bruce, to throw that organ before them and follow it into the fray. They flatter themselves that, having risked so tremendous a stake, they must needs evoke a declaration and win their lover. Such a practice is doubtless a spur to exertion, but it has its drawbacks and its dangers. In my opinion it is more maidenly to wait till they have answered ‘ Yes ’ to a very important question. Mary Marvon was of this

opinion; her heart was still her own, but it roved, and took short swallow flights from home—how could she help it?—in the direction of Edgar Dornay.

She was thinking over what Mrs. Beckett had said to her the previous day; no doubt it would be to her advantage to marry the man she loved, but that was the very reason which gave her pause. It is well to look closely into any course which is recommended to us by inclination and our own interests. The question with her was, would her marriage with Edgar Dornay be to *his* advantage? She knew that his present life was a luxurious one; and, though she credited him with certain genuine qualities, the notion of his possessing which, in those who knew him better, would have evoked a smile, she doubted of his fitness for a life-long ‘day of small things’; an existence mitigated by cheap and unfrequent pleasures, and flawed by economies and acts of self-denial. At times she even thought she had noticed in him aspirations after great wealth, or at all

events an admiration of it. She was not so foolish as to imagine that three months after marriage he would be as much in love with her as he professed to be at present ; but her beauty was not her sheet anchor, as it is with so many girls. She had some hope that by that time he would have learnt to love her for what she had in her of true worth.

For Mary Marvon, though portionless and almost friendless, was much too honest to hold herself worthless ; in her heart of hearts she believed herself worthy of Edgar’s love, and would have done so had he been as rich as Mrs. Beckett—not that she exaggerated her own merits, but because she was little more impressed by mere money than was her four-footed companion.

‘ Wough, wough ! ’ said Alexander, who was looking through the balustrade by the side of his mistress, and had recognised an acquaintance upon the south side of the lake. It was a hoarse murmur rather than a growl ; but it was not a note of welcome. It seemed

to say, 'There's a person I don't much care about coming towards us yonder; but, since you know him, perhaps it's as well to mention the fact.'

Mary, who understood Alexander quite well, looked in the direction of his gaze, and at once perceived its object.

The 'person' was Edgar Dornay, handsome even in the morning, but whose bright intelligent face, or what she could see of it, for his head was bent, was fuller of thought than usual. At the sight of him her heart gave a quick jump, her cheeks became suffused with a sudden glow, and the light leaped into her eyes; for the moment, love, taking advantage of her solitude—for, as it happened, there was no other passenger on the bridge—had asserted itself. The next moment she was herself again; but if she could have looked into the young man's mind, she would have despised herself for that momentary weakness. He was thinking of the momentous interview that was to take place that afternoon at Beckett House,

and of the conversation he had held on the Saturday night with his uncle. That gentleman, as we know, had failed to turn him from his purpose, but his arguments had been by no means without their effect ; and he shrank from any recapitulation of them. He had not seen his relative since he returned from Brighton, and did not intend to see him (though there was an opportunity of doing so, since Uncle Ralph always lunched at his club) till he had seen the widow. His best chance, he felt, of carrying out his plan was to see him no more till it was completed, or till he had asked Mrs. Beckett, *in propriâ personâ*, to marry him, and been formally accepted. And above all, until this was done it was his intention to keep clear of Mary Marvon.

Every word Ralph had spoken concerning her had had a barb in it ; and what his uncle had said was as nothing compared with the gnawings of his own thoughts, the sense of cowardice and falsehood and shame, and above all the consciousness of loss. For in his own

way Edgar Dornay loved the girl—shrank from losing her, and was rendered desperate by the thought of another possessing her. When she was by his side she was all in all to him; but apart from her, or, as he grossly expressed it to himself, when ‘in his sober senses,’ he loved other things better—such as luxury and pleasure and ease. He had never made Mary an offer, but he had meant to do it, and he felt that she knew he meant it; he believed that he had won her heart, or rather stolen it, since it now turned out it was gained under false pretences, and that after to-day she would regard him as a thief and a liar.

In comparison with this reflection all other drawbacks in connection with the widow faded into nothing; if her age had been doubled and her income halved, and his conduct to Mary Marvon could only have been blotted out, his condition would have been preferable to what it was at that moment. How could he ever hold up his head in her presence and meet her reproachful eyes? He foresaw that her first

act on learning what he had done would be to leave Beckett House for a life of poverty and dependence, since from the woman who was her rival, and whose gold had outweighed her worth in his eyes, she would scorn to take a penny. Although a selfish man, Edgar Dornay was (as yet) by no means callous, and the thought of these things gave him great discomfort. After much pondering, he had come to the conclusion that the best thing he could do for himself after his interview with Mrs. Beckett was to leave town for a few days ; when, on his return to Park Lane, he felt well assured he should find the coast clear. Having made his plans thus far, he drew a long breath, like a man who ‘ sees his way ’ through at least the first part of a difficulty ; and, raising his eyes from the ground for the first time, saw Mary Marvon standing on the bridge.

At the same moment their eyes met ; if they had not done so, Mr. Edgar Dornay would without doubt have turned his face homeward and gone back again ; but though he felt him-

self to be a coward every inch of him, he was not such a coward as that. He mounted the slope that led to the bridge, and met her with an outstretched hand.

‘I had no idea that you were to be found abroad so early, Mr. Dornay,’ said Mary. ‘Report has maligned you.’

‘Report generally does,’ he answered gravely. ‘It is unfortunate for poor human nature, whose motives need extenuation rather than to have things set down in malice’

He was thinking of what she would say of him when she came to know all.

‘You are philosophic,’ she said, smiling. ‘That is a bad sign ; I am afraid you have not yet breakfasted, Mr. Dornay.’

It was very true ; he had sat down to the morning meal at Brighton, but, notwithstanding the boasted effects of the sea breeze, had left it almost untasted. ‘You are taking your walk earlier than usual, yourself, are you not, Mary?’

He would have said ‘Miss Marvon’ had he

dared, but his familiarity of manner had gone beyond that ; she still gave him his proper title, but when they were alone together he had of late addressed her by her Christian name.

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘Mrs. Beckett is engaged with Mr. Rennie ; he has come to transact some pressing and important matter, she told me, which would deprive me of her companionship.’

‘What did she mean?’ inquired Edgar, turning pale. To his disordered mind there seemed a dreadful significance in those simple words.

‘Well, she meant that I must be content with my four-footed friend here this morning—down, Alec ! down, my dear !’ for the affectionate creature, catching this allusion to himself or at least the glance that accompanied it, wished to place by way of epaulettes a gigantic paw on each of her dainty shoulders—‘I did not of course calculate upon the pleasure of meeting you, Mr. Dornay.’

‘No,’ he answered gently, ‘no.’ His heart

was melting within him like wax ; the sight of her beauty, the sound of her voice, were overcoming him. Absence is said to ‘ make the heart grow fonder,’ but presence, especially if the object of our affections is attractive, has a still more powerful influence in that way. This was the very thing that he had been afraid of—to meet her face to face—and he had reason to fear it.

‘ And how was Mr. Rennie looking?’ He did not dare to speak of Mrs. Beckett. ‘ As like the Sphinx as usual, I suppose ; full of his secrets?’

‘ He is never secretive with me ; not of course that he ever tells me anything, but he is most frank and kind. I venture to think that I am rather a favourite of his.’

‘ I do not wonder at that.’

She gave him, with infinite grace, an almost imperceptible curtsy. ‘ Thank you, sir ; but I am afraid it is from no personal merit that Mr. Rennie is so civil to me. I fancy it is a pleasant change to him to talk with one who

never speaks of money, because she has none. Mrs. Beckett tells me that he has no such thing as a poor client. They are now probably disposing of tens of thousands—millions, for all I know—those two.’

Edgar sighed.

‘ You are wishing that you had millions yourself, Mr. Dornay ? ’

‘ No ; quite the contrary. I mean,’ he added hastily, ‘ that my heart was not just then fixed on—the subject you suggest.’

‘ Then it sometimes is, I infer.’

‘ Sometimes ; that is, I have sometimes thought—as most of us have—how pleasant it would be to be rich.’

They had left the bridge by this time, and were slowly crossing the Park in the direction of the Reformers’ Tree. There was no one near them except Alexander, who followed closely behind. His brow was clouded, his head depressed ; his massive jaws seemed to find attraction in the calves of Mr. Edgar Dornay’s legs, as they alternately presented themselves to his notice.

‘I have never speculated upon that subject myself,’ said Mary, gravely ; ‘perhaps from the impossibility, in my case, of such a dream being realised. But I can easily understand *your* doing so. I do not think you are fitted to be a poor man.’

‘You mean a poor bachelor. In my present position I own that wealth has its allurements. Pleasure can be purchased, but happiness cannot ; and, after all, what man desires is happiness ; the lasting good.’

‘But one must be sure of its lasting,’ she answered gravely ; ‘that is the difficulty.’

‘No doubt. The best road to it, however, it is agreed upon all hands, is to secure a loving wife.’

‘That is not your uncle’s view,’ said Mary, lightly. She knew whither his talk was tending, and did not wish to encourage it. Was it some presentiment that warned her to keep him at arm’s length that morning ?

‘There are doubtless some who are happiest as single men,’ admitted Edgar. ‘My uncle

Ralph perhaps for one ; but do not suppose he does not advocate matrimony for others ; for myself, for instance. Your ears should have burnt the other night, since he spent hours of it in singing your praises.’

‘ A somewhat new departure for him, was it not ? ’ she inquired drily, but without surprise ; for Mr. Ralph Dornay, as we know, had himself prepared her for it.

‘ Yes ; it is never too late to mend, however, and I will do him the justice to say that his recantation has been a very full one.’

Here some one met them on the path ; and, in drawing nearer to the girl, his arm touched hers. When he had shaken hands with her twenty minutes ago, his mind had been divided between her and another ; the clasp of her hand had thrilled him a little, but that had been all. But now, since he had been some time in her company, and his mind had been dwelling on her and no other, that touch set his pulses ‘ throbbing with the fulness of the spring.’ In an instant, as a sudden wind from the gates

of the sun clears the heavens of cloud, all sordid thoughts were swept away ; the widow and her money were forgotten.

‘As for Uncle Ralph, Mary,’ he continued, in a low and fervid tone, ‘he was never an obstacle to my love for you ; nothing could be that ; but he is my nearest relative, and of course it pleases me to feel that such opposition as it was in his power to give has been withdrawn. Instead of being your enemy he is now your ally.’

‘So he was so good as to tell me on Saturday,’ said Mary, coldly.

The young man saw that he had lost ground.

‘Of course, Mary,’ he put in quickly, ‘it matters even less to you than it does to me whether Uncle Ralph approves of our being engaged or not. I only mentioned it to show that there were now no hindrances to it, however slight. You will not say “no,” darling, merely because there is no reason for it, out of sheer caprice?’

‘ Certainly not,’ she said. ‘ My doubts—for I have doubts—arise from no fanciful cause, but from what I know of your own nature.’

‘ My nature ! Would to heaven, Mary, you could this moment look into my inmost heart ; you would see yourself and no other mirrored there.’

‘ I was not thinking of any other, Edgar,’ she said with a slight blush ; ‘ to do you justice, I do not believe you capable of double-dealing.’

His eyes left hers and sought the ground ; the blush on her face was reflected on his own, and she attributed it to the same cause ; she took it for modesty because she had praised him—and not for shame. ‘ Moreover,’ she continued, ‘ I quite believe that at this moment you think you could be happy with me without those luxuries—or with a great diminution of them—on which your happiness has hitherto so largely depended.’

‘ My darling,’ he answered vehemently, ‘ what is luxury, what is wealth, compared with

the possession of such a treasure as you? That is what I pine for; all else is as nothing to me. Oh, Mary, if you would only believe me!’

‘I wish to believe you, Edgar,’ she answered hesitatingly; ‘but I dare not.’

His very fervour increased her reluctance, even while it filled her with delight; it seemed to her that it was wrong to take advantage of such headlong and unreasoning passion.

‘Then, if you wish it, that is all *I* wish,’ he put in hastily. ‘My darling! my darling!’

He longed to clasp her in his arms; but that was impossible, as the trees in Hyde Park offer by no means that ‘boundless contiguity of shade’ so essential for such a proceeding; moreover (though he would have risked *that*), Alexander would have probably resented any such demonstration. As for Mary, her limbs trembled beneath her, and thereby typified her mental condition. Shaken by the vehemence of his protestations and the fascination

of his presence, her resolution was fast giving way.

‘ I must go in now, Edgar,’ she murmured.

‘ But not as you came out, Mary,’ he answered quickly ; ‘ you are no longer a free woman, remember ; you are mine.’

‘ Not yet,’ she said, but this time with a faint smile.

It was her last protest.

‘ That is only because the agreement is not ratified,’ he murmured tenderly.

‘ I will come ’—then he suddenly remembered that he could not come ; that he no more dared enter into Beckett House on the errand in question than into the abode of the queen lioness in the Zoological Gardens—‘ that is, I will write to-day,’ he stammered ; ‘ then you will send me your answer in black and white ; and it will be “ Yes,” my darling. I *know* it will be “ Yes.” ’

‘ I suppose it must be “ Yes,” ’ said Mary, softly.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SUBSTITUTE.

HAVING once, though it is true only tacitly, consented to engage herself to Edgar Dornay, Mary Marvon ventured to be very happy. It is not, as we have been told, for companions and dependants to indulge themselves in the luxury of woe ; how much more, then, in that of happiness ! And though Mary herself, thanks to the fortunate circumstances of her position as much as to her native pride, felt little of this social depression, she seldom gave way to vivacity. On this occasion, however, the girl returned home in high spirits ; and it was for this reason, perhaps, that she did not notice the unusual gaiety of her hostess. Mrs. Beckett was generally what, if she were a man, would

have been called 'good company,' but she had never before been so bright and merry. She was happy in the consciousness that she had, with Mr. Rennie's aid, conferred great advantage upon the man she loved ; and happy also on her own account. But she did not, as on the last occasion when she and Mary were alone together, make marriage the topic of conversation. It would be necessary sooner or later, of course, to allude to her engagement, but at present she shrank from it. Notwithstanding her protestations of independence and carelessness of the opinion of the world, she felt some embarrassment in communicating her news even to Mary Marvon.

Mary herself felt something of the same kind. She indeed had nothing to be ashamed of in those future prospects of which not sooner or later, but very soon, it behoved her to speak to her hostess ; for had not Mrs. Beckett with her own lips advised her to accept the first eligible offer ? But she had an idea that her news would very much astonish the widow,

and felt some coyness in broaching the subject *à propos des bottes*.

The only approach that Mrs. Beckett made to it, so far from encouraging her to pursue it, had quite a contrary effect. Her hostess informed the butler at luncheon that she would not require her carriage that afternoon; and also that she would be at home to nobody except Mr. Dornay.

‘Mr. Ralph or Mr. Edgar, my lady?’ he inquired. It was a most unfortunate question, for the widow’s remark was intended to be of great significance. It was, in fact, her method of preparing the way for informing Mary of what had happened.

‘I said Mr. Dornay,’ she answered with severity. ‘If I had meant Mr. Ralph I should have said Mr. Ralph.’

It was rather hard on the butler, who, less acquainted with precedence than with perquisites, naturally imagined that Mr. Ralph, being the elder, was of right Mr. Dornay. The sharpness of the widow’s tone did not escape

Mary's attention, but the remark itself filled her with amazement. How was it, if Edgar had an appointment with the widow, that he had not informed her (Mary) of it while they were in the Park together? and why had he spoken of writing to her when he was thus about to have so early an opportunity of seeing her? On the other hand—not, of course, anticipating their recent interview and its happy result—perhaps he had sought a personal interview with Mrs. Beckett, to enlist her assistance in pressing his suit.

Never were two women placed in a more false position to one another than were Mary Marvon and her hostess, and yet through no fault of their own.

After luncheon, Mrs. Beckett retired to her boudoir, and Mary to her own room; each glad enough to be alone, but without the least mistrust or ill-feeling as respected the other.

By three o'clock the widow's impatience had become considerable. She was very far from

wishing that any particular respect should be paid to her on the ground of age, but she could not but remember that when her last husband was courting her he was always rather before his time than after, and that even against Sir Robert there had been nothing to complain of as regarded punctuality. At a quarter past three o'clock she felt that she had been foolish in making her Edgar so completely independent of her, and experienced some satisfaction in reflecting that the document which Mr. Rennie had sent to her according to promise was only a copy of her instructions. She appreciated, not for the first time, the wisdom of the legal doctrine that judgment should precede execution.

At half past three, her indignation against her Edgar was so considerable that she not only repented of all her good intentions towards the young man, but repented—not for the money's sake, but that of her own self-respect—of having sent him that little cheque for 500*l*. Then her maid knocked at her door,

and her heart leapt up with a joyful bound, and she felt she could forgive him anything.

‘If you please, my lady, Mr. Dornay is here.’

‘Why is he not shown up at once? Did I not give orders to Harris to that effect?’

‘Why, yes, my lady; but he says as this is the wrong Mr. Dornay.’

‘The wrong Mr. Dornay? What do you mean? Who is it?’

‘Well, please my lady, it’s Mr. Ralph.’

This did not please my lady at all; indeed it was very far from pleasing her; but she could not say so. At first, indeed, she was even more alarmed than disgusted. She feared that some accident had happened to Edgar. Good heavens, suppose he had been thrown from his horse! And she had just been accusing him of ingratitude, and of such infidelity as man, and man alone, was capable.

‘Show Mr. Ralph Dornay up.’

He came, the very pink of perfection as to

apparel ; with his head erect and a quick elastic step ; a very presentable gentleman of four-and-forty to all appearance at oldest ; but with a certain air of tender gravity which she had never before known him to wear.

He took the hand she extended towards him, and pressed it respectfully. ‘ Nothing has happened to your nephew, I trust ? ’ she inquired, with irrepressible anxiety.

‘ Nothing—that is to say, physically ; he is well enough in health.’ She knew at once that he had changed his mind about her, as certainly as though she had heard it from his own lips. A mist seemed to form itself before her eyes, but not from tears ; the weakness to which she was giving way was not of that sort at all ; she was livid with fury, the *spretæ injuria formæ*—second only to a wrong done to her offspring in its power of arousing woman’s hate—was raging within her. But there was no heat. Her face was pale and stiff as marble, and it was in a very quiet tone that she observed :—

‘You know, I suppose, that I was expecting him.’

Uncle Ralph closed his eyes and uplifted his hands; no words could have more clearly expressed his shame and abhorrence of what had occurred; he looked like some virtuous father in a melodrama, desolated by the misconduct of an unworthy son.

‘My dear Mrs. Beckett,’ he answered impressively, ‘I know *all*; that is to say,’ he added hastily, remembering that there were some incidents in the matter in hand (such as Mrs. Beckett’s letter to his nephew) which he had better *not* know, ‘all that a man who feels he has behaved recklessly and discredibly dares to tell another. I am come here not to excuse Edgar, nor even to palliate his conduct, but, so far as it admits of explanation, to explain it.’

The widow sat like a statue, ‘staring right on’ at the wall behind him with straining eyes; she could not trust herself, such was the humiliation and shame—but above all the

anger—that consumed her, to make so much as a sign. If life should stir within her ever so little, it seemed to her that the pent-up torrent of her wrath must needs burst forth, and that she must ‘say things’ of which she would repent her whole life long. This impassiveness was extremely embarrassing to Uncle Ralph, who was much in want of a lead; he felt like a man who starts upon an aërial voyage without a straw to tell him which way the wind is blowing, and is very much afraid of his balloon going to sea.

‘The fact is, my dear Mrs. Beckett, my nephew Edgar is impressionable—too impressionable—tender-hearted, very susceptible of kindness, but a creature of impulse. Of course he did not acquaint me with the actual details of the transaction in question; but I understand that you exhibited the generosity that is habitual with you, though it is such as does not enter into the dreams of others. There lay his error; he attached too special and particular significance to an act which was

with you one of everyday practice ; in point of fact,' concluded Uncle Ralph, beginning to lose confidence in his balancing pole upon this very high rope, ' you sent him some money.'

' I did !' The words shot out from the poor lady's tight-shut lips like a pellet from a pop-gun. ' The sum,' she added with more self-command of tone, ' was a very small one.'

' No doubt ; that is, it seemed so to you, dear Mrs. Beckett ; but we have not all your princely revenues. Moreover, it is the characteristic of a nature such as Edgar's to exaggerate a kindness. His heart was overflowing with gratitude. On the impulse of the moment he wrote to you a letter which he now regrets ; since in it (as I am given to understand) he offered you, though it is true only by implication, what was not his to give.'

The widow smiled faintly ; she felt sick at heart. This news that Edgar loved another was worse—infinately worse—than all ; but still she smiled.

' You did not take it in that sense ?' con-

tinued the other eagerly. ‘I am indeed delighted to hear it ; that was the very view of the matter I took myself. “My dear Edgar,” I said, “if Mrs. Beckett has taken your communication in earnest” ’—the widow’s brow darkened. Uncle Ralph altered his course with the speed of a skater who nears a hole—and a very deep one—‘“or rather I should say if Mrs. Beckett fails to see that your gratitude has overwhelmed your judgment, your letter will give her annoyance. She will very justly consider it a piece of impertinence. That you are a great favourite of hers is true (which emboldens me to hope that she will forgive you) ; but she has never given you the slightest encouragement—even if you were free to do it, which you are not—to make any such proposal to her. It is one which a man, much more suitable for her than yourself, would, under her exceptional circumstances, hesitate to make, however he might admire and adore her.” ’

Here Uncle Ralph’s voice faltered ; it was

clear that he was suffering from personal emotion.

“Such a proceeding on his part would be open to so much misconstruction, that he would prefer to carry his secret with him to the grave. But you, you have rushed in where—that is to say, where a more eligible, though not perhaps a more worthy, suitor would have hesitated to tread. My only hope—which, however, is a firm one—is that this dear and excellent lady will have appreciated your motives, and therefore understood your mistake.” I told him all that,’ concluded Uncle Ralph, wiping his forehead instead of his eyes. He was quite conscious of the anticlimax involved in the last sentence, but he really could not maintain this noble style any longer ; it was like keeping five balls going in the air at once—all spiked.

‘I quite understood the matter,’ returned the widow, beginning to recover her self-possession and feeling not a little grateful to her companion for pointing out to her any road

which avoided the valley of humiliation ; ‘ but I thought your nephew would have had the grace to make an apology with his own lips.’

‘ Ah, madam, pray have pity upon him !’ returned Uncle Ralph, pathetically. ‘ He was ashamed to do so ; perhaps he feared, in the presence of so much graciousness and beauty’ (Mrs. Beckett blushed not unbecomingly, and certainly not because she was offended), ‘ that he should again waver in his allegiance where it was due by rights—for indeed it had been offered and was accepted.’ A hope that his previous words had fanned anew in the widow’s breast here faded away and became cold embers. Uncle Ralph read it in her face, but he could not afford to spare her. It was necessary to his own interests that that hope should die ; and he accordingly set his heel upon it. ‘ Yes, madam, my nephew is engaged to another lady. So far, as I told him, he is the more excusable, since, being so situated, his conduct towards yourself shows that he had taken leave of his senses.’

Without taking notice of this plea of insanity Mrs. Beckett inquired in quiet tones, 'Has your nephew been long engaged to be married?'

The word 'long' in respect of time is almost as vague and variable as the carpenter's definition of magnitude—'about the size of a piece of chalk.' Uncle Ralph knew very well—for Edgar had made a clean breast to him of everything at luncheon, and besought his assistance—that his engagement to Mary was about three hours old, but it would have been injudicious to say so. 'Not a very long time,' he replied evasively; 'but the attachment is an old one, and to me I must say,' he added with a gentle sigh, 'a most inexplicable one.'

'Why?'

The curtness of this monosyllabic inquiry seemed to disconcert Mr. Ralph Dornay exceedingly.

'Well; there are certain reasons, madam, if you compel me to mention them. Under the same roof with the object of my nephew's

affections, who has little beyond personal beauty, and (I admit) a sweet disposition, to recommend her, there dwells another lady equally attractive in those respects, and, in my humble opinion, a thousand times more worthy of a man's devotion.'

'Do I know this young woman, Mr. Dornay?'

'You do, madam.'

She had anticipated no other reply; but its effect was extraordinary. Her eyes literally flashed fire; she did not speak, but her lips moved rapidly; her foot tapped vehemently upon the floor as if in warning to something within her—her temper—to keep itself within bounds.

'I have heard of a fit of jealousy,' thought Uncle Ralph to himself, 'and begad she is going to have one. This is the worst bit of the road, and I wish I was well over it.'

'So—so, Mr. Dornay,' continued the widow, in a voice between a hiss and a scream, 'your nephew has been paying court to Miss

Marvon—my companion—has he, beneath my very roof? I hope at least that his intentions were honourable.'

'Come, that's well,' thought Uncle Ralph ; 'that *must* have relieved her.' But it was with a deprecating air and in very gentle tones that he replied, 'Oh yes ; as far as that goes, certainly. Indeed, I have a letter from him to the young lady herself which, as I have reason to believe, sets forth——'

'Give it me !' and Mrs. Beckett held forth her hand with an imperious gesture.

Here was a crisis indeed. If he committed what he knew to be Edgar's private offer of marriage to Mary Marvon into the widow's hands, good-bye for ever to his nephew's friendship ; a long farewell to all the advantages flowing from 'the head of the family' and ancestral ties ; but if he refused, it was equally plain that he would lose the widow.

'There is nothing, my dear Mrs. Beckett, *nothing*—that I could find in my heart to

refuse you ; I would that you could read that heart.'

'I have, I do,' she said significantly. He took her still extended hand and kissed it. 'Is it possible,' he whispered softly but boldly, 'that I may hope one day to call this mine?'

She did not say 'Yes'—though she had certainly well understood him—and she did not say 'No.' Many emotions were at work within her—though none of them was love—which urged her to accept him. The most powerful of them was pique—which has driven both man and woman into wedlock with more precipitancy than ever love did ; there was revenge which she could wreak by this means both upon the unfaithful Edgar and on Mary ; and there was pride, for thus she saw her way to save herself from humiliation in the eyes of Mr. Rennie. But amidst it all her thoughts were much more occupied with her old love than with her new.

'Give me the letter !' she repeated—'your nephew's letter.'

Uncle Ralph put a note into her hand ; it was addressed to herself in Edgar's handwriting.

‘What is this?’ she inquired.

‘Carried away by emotion and overwhelmed by gratitude to you for holding out a hope to me which I myself had scarcely ventured to entertain, I had forgotten this little matter,’ he said. ‘I believe it contains nothing but your cheque.’

She tore it across and across with vehemence, and snowed the fragments on the floor.

‘I want his letter to Mary Marvon.’

It was certainly a breach of confidence and something worse, but Mr. Ralph Dornay had gone too far to retreat ; he gave her Mary Marvon's letter. She clutched it with eager haste.

‘I know you will respect the contents,’ he said ; not that he thought she would, but by way of protest against their violation, and because he had been brought up as a gentleman.

‘Truly, they merit respect,’ was the scorn-

ful rejoinder. 'You may depend, Mr. Dornay, upon this letter reaching its destination; and now, if you please, I must be alone.'

'And when, my dear Mrs. Beckett'—he did not even yet dare address her by her Christian name—'may I hope to see you again? After having made me the happiest of men, do not doom me to banishment, every moment of which will be torture.'

'To-morrow.'

'At what hour shall I find you alone?'

'At any hour,' she answered (with an exultant look which the other neatly translated 'Miss Sharp-tongue will get her *congé* then at once'); 'you may come to lunch if you like.'

'At two o'clock then, to-morrow; good-bye.' He took her hand, and, once more raising it to his lips, whispered so that she could hear it or not, as she pleased, 'Dear, dearest Kitty.'

CHAPTER XII.

TWO WOMEN.

THERE are bad men as there are bad women—and a great many more of the former than of the latter—but good does not become bad in the male with such rapidity as in the female. *Nemo repente*, &c., is a remark that does not apply to the softer sex. They are quicker about everything ; and, for one thing, to take offence. Wound a woman, even by accident, in her susceptibilities, her admiration for her husband, her love for her children, her own good looks, or her age, and you will ‘see sparks.’ Should she be supplanted in the affections of her lover it will arouse a sleeping devil such as you would never believe could have found harbour in so fair a form. Whether

you resist him or not, he will not 'flee from you,' and you may be considered exceptionally fortunate if he does not fly *at* you.

If Mrs. Beckett has not given the reader the impression of being on the whole a good sort of woman. it is the fault of him who has described her ; but just at present she is hardly recognisable as a woman at all. Edgar Dornay's letter to Mary Marvon lies before her unopened ; I don't say she would have read it if she could, but I think it fortunate that he did not put it into an adhesive envelope, but took the precaution to seal it. In a metaphorical sense she had already read it, for her eyes pierced through and through it ; she would have given a thousand pounds to have been able to possess herself of its contents without detection ; but the Dornay crest was a peculiar one, and though she might be said to have duplicated her arrangements with certain members of the family, she had no duplicate of *that*.

Another letter lay beside it in the same

handwriting; the one she had herself received but yesterday from her faithless swain—he had lied to her, humiliated her, played her false, and she had not one spark of affection left for him. But she did not at that moment hate him as she hated that ‘impudent, treacherous, designing minx’—who, as a matter of fact, had not injured her in thought or word or deed—Mary Marvon.

The second letter—the widow’s own—was loathsome to her, but she was glad that she had not torn it up in her first paroxysm of fury (which she had been tempted to do) as she had torn the cheque; for it still had its uses. Presently, though it was like putting a serpent there, she placed it in her bosom, and with the other (Mary’s letter) in her hand she descended into the drawing-room and rang the bell.

‘Is Miss Marvon within doors?’

‘I believe so, my lady.’

‘Tell her—that is, tell Simmons to tell her—that I wish to see her in her own room.’

After a few minutes, to admit of her being

prepared for her and alone, the widow went upstairs as Eleanor visited Rosamond ; the bowl in one hand, the dagger in the other. But her errand was less merciful—it was her intention to use both.

Mary, inclined for solitude, and chewing the cud of sweet reflection, had been more annoyed than surprised by the maid's message ; it had interrupted some bright day-dreams, but it was not unusual for Mrs. Beckett to seek half an hour's intimate talk with her young companion, which she playfully termed 'a keg-meg.' Poor Mary, who had been waiting for the postman with her ears pricked, little imagined what sort of a keg-meg it was destined to be.

Directly she caught sight of Mrs. Beckett's face, indeed, she knew that something was wrong, and very wrong ; not a suspicion, however, crossed her mind of the real state of the case. She rose quickly, with a look of affectionate sympathy. 'My dear Mrs. Beckett, what has happened ?'

'I have brought you a letter, Miss Marvon ;'

here she threw it on the table. 'It *is* for you, is it not?' for Mary was gazing at it with wild surprise. 'You know the handwriting, I suppose, and I fancy you must have been expecting it.'

'Yes, Mrs. Beckett, I did expect it.'

Mary had drawn herself up to her full height, and was looking the widow straight in the face; her manner was respectful, but by no means subservient. Her voice was resolute and without a tremor. It seemed to say, 'You are my social superior, but you have no right to interfere with my private affairs.'

'Oh, you did, did you? You have the impudence to tell me that.'

'Madam!'

'Yes; I repeat it, *the impudence*. How dare you look me in the face like that, conscious as you must be of such underhand and shameful ways? Yes, you may well blush; I am glad to see you *can* blush.'

'You must have gone mad, Mrs. Beckett,' interrupted Mary; not because she thought so,

but because, though a sweet-tempered and generous girl, she was not a patient Griselda.

‘That is true,’ was the widow’s unexpected reply. ‘I must have gone stark staring mad to have so long believed in the innocence of such a treacherous, artful creature ; to have wasted kindness and consideration on such an ingrate. I ought to have remembered the proverb about setting beggars on horseback.’

‘And when, madam, may I ask, have I ever begged of you?’

It was a pertinent question ; for twenty times had the widow protested to her young companion that she was a treasure that no money could buy, and that the obligation in the matter of her engagement at Beckett House lay on the side of the employer, and not of the employed. Mary’s salary, though a liberal one, was not excessive, and she herself had declined, notwithstanding Mrs. Beckett’s repeated solicitations, to have it raised. It could certainly not be said with any truth that she had begged of her. There was a faint mitigation in Mrs.

Beckett's tone. It was still vinegar, but vinegar without cayenne pepper, as she replied, 'At all events, Miss Marvon, your condition here was that of an inferior, and it ill became you indeed to set your cap, as you have done, at a gentleman like Mr. Dornay, my guest and equal.'

'Measured by the purse, madam,' returned Mary, coldly, 'no doubt you are in a very superior position; still, there are other standards. I will admit—though I see it now for the first time—that my proper course was to have told you of Mr. Dornay's attentions to me; but I will not admit—no, not for a moment—that there was anything to be reprobated in my encouraging them, even if I did encourage them, which, as he will tell you, I never did.'

'*He* will tell me!' echoed the other disdainfully. 'Do you think I shall stoop to ask him? Do you think I don't know how your whole scheme was carried on as though I had seen it played? Your pretence of modesty, your mock humility, your *innocence*, while all

the time your heart—no, not your heart, your cunning, artful mind—was fixed on making him your husband ; him in whose veins runs the best blood in England, and you a base-born nobody—nobody's child.'

'That is false!' interrupted the girl, with a deep flush. 'Everything you say is false. Who told you I was—what you said just now?'

'Never mind who told me. I know it. Ask your friend Mrs. Sotheran. *You* to marry Edgar Dornay ; *you* ! I wish him joy of you. Read his letter, his offer of disinterested love ; and when you have read it, read *that*.' She took the note that lay in her bosom and threw it on the table beside the other. 'You will see there that you were not the first to whom he has offered himself ; that you were but a second thought, such as strikes a man on the spur of the moment—a *pis aller*, a makeshift, that he takes up with out of pique, when he has failed to secure for himself wealth and station.'

She was gone in a moment, leaving the

letters behind her, and Mary gazing at them with bewildered looks.

What had happened? What did it all mean? All that she knew for certain was that a terrible change had befallen her, and that she was not the same woman who but a few minutes ago had been indulging in dreams of happiness, lapping herself in soft Lydian airs, or rather to that 'unheard music' which the poet truly tells us is sweeter far than any evoked from chord.

Mrs. Beckett had said many things which, whether true or false, demanded her immediate attention; it behoved her to look them in the face, and, for the future, life itself in the face. She knew even now that she would have to fight her way in the world alone; and well indeed for her if that should prove the worst of it. Poor she knew she was, but base-born! If *that* was true—well, what mattered? What need is there to blush for offences for which we ourselves are in no way to blame? Yet the colour was high in poor Mary's cheeks.

First to be considered, however—if, indeed, she was capable of consideration or reflection—were the letters. Mrs. Beckett had recommended her to read them in a certain order. It was but natural that she should take the contrary course. She read the widow's letter first.

‘My dear Mrs. Beckett,—Your kind letter has affected me beyond measure. I feel I am not worthy of your love, but I hope to become worthy of it. I shall be with you at three o'clock on Monday, when I shall trust to find you alone.

‘Ever yours affectionately,

‘EDGAR DORNAY.’

The date was Saturday—only Saturday! He was to have been with Mrs. Beckett to-day almost at that very hour. Doubtless he would have been with her had she not rejected him by letter in the meantime; and having received that letter and found his chances of ‘securing wealth and station’ (those were the woman's

very words) were over, he had offered his disdained hand that very morning to herself. Poor Mary! If her rival's advice had been followed, her cup would without doubt have been made more bitter for her; to have opened her lover's letter first, and afterwards to have learnt his infidelity, would have been hard indeed. But she was forewarned and forearmed. His burning words of passion reached her heart but could not sear it; it had to some extent been rendered callous; his protestations of eternal love awoke no answering chord, and even some contempt. She had misplaced her love; but, having discovered her mistake, she was not one of those who waste it to the very dregs upon an unworthy object. She was not angry with him as Mrs. Beckett had been; nay, even while she despised him, she pitied him. 'What was luxury, what was wealth,' he had said to her only a few hours ago, 'compared with such a treasure as herself?' And only a few hours before he had told her so, he had proposed to the richest widow in England! She did not

know, of course, what had actually occurred; that the widow had sent him money and proposed to *him*; yet she pretty accurately guessed how matters lay and the motives that had actuated him. She felt that Edgar Dornay had preferred her to her rival all along; that his love for her had even to a certain extent been genuine; nay, she believed (reading his conduct of the morning by the light now thrown upon it) that he had experienced a certain sense of relief in having been rejected by the widow, and left free to follow what had been his inclination throughout. But Mary Marvon was not the sort of woman who is willing to accept a man's inclination in exchange for her love. Not for one single instant did she entertain the thought of his now becoming her husband. It was not the apprehension of any weakness on her own part—the idea that with reflection should intrude the least shadow of a doubt—which caused her to sit down and pen him these few lines at once:—

‘Dear Sir,—Mrs. Beckett has just handed me your letter, as well as your note of Saturday addressed to herself. I have no more to say to you, save that I wish you well.

‘Yours sincerely,

‘MARY MARVON.’

She merely wished to get that matter over and done with. As to getting it ‘off her mind,’ that, alas! was quite another thing. It was likely to remain as long as memory held its seat there. It seemed to her as though her love had not so much been misplaced as mislaid; that the faculty of entertaining the passion was irrevocably lost. If she had not had that faculty she would have missed nothing; it is not the man who is born blind who suffers, but the man who has had the use of his sight and becomes blind.

There are certain cases of misfortune in which our very deficiencies are of advantage to us; not in matters material—every drawback is there an additional source of unhappiness—

but in those of sentiment and spiritual life. When, for instance, one is poor, and there is an absolute necessity for exertion, the bruised heart does not feel its pain as it does when one is prosperous; one must needs be up and doing, either for one's own sake or for that of others, and work not only prevents us from brooding over our calamities but is itself a balm. To stay another hour under Mrs. Beckett's roof seemed intolerable to Mary; there was an immediate necessity for her leaving it; but whither, in her forlorn and friendless condition, should she go?

To Letcombe Dottrell she could hardly go without an invitation, or at least an express permission from Mrs. Sotheran. There had been always a disinclination on the part of that lady to see her at her own home; she had been so kind and friendly to her in all other respects that this had hitherto seemed inexplicable to Mary. But now, after those cruel words of Mrs. Beckett, she felt that there might be some reason for it. Base-born! If so, the Past,

like the Future, was full of humiliation and bitterness ; it had been a mistaken kindness to conceal such a misfortune from her ; but now, at all events, it behoved her to know the worst. Only there were things still more pressing. First and foremost, her letter to Edgar must be despatched ; while it remained unsent, it seemed to her that she was bound by invisible but shameful chains ; and then she must cast about in her mind for some temporary home in town till Mrs. Sotheran could be communicated with. She was about to ring the bell when Simmons entered.

My lady's lady's-maid, as she delighted to call herself, was of mature years and of a rueful countenance ; her inferiors addressed her as Mrs. Simmons, but it was but a title of courtesy, she still withered upon the virgin thorn. She was a mere anatomy of a woman, reminding you, in her extreme scragginess, of the poet's ungallant observation, ' Madam, if I know your sex by the fashion of your bones.' But her frame was always elegantly apparelled, and

within it there was a kindly heart. She had never felt the antipathy of her class towards her mistress's 'companion'; and, now she was in trouble, she sympathised with her. What had actually happened of course she did not know; she would have given her ears to know, though they were an exceptionally large pair; but she well understood that Miss Marvon had had notice to quit, or, as Mr. Harris below stairs had more concisely expressed it, 'had got the sack.'

'If you please, Miss, my lady bade me give you this note.'

It ran as follows:—

'Mrs. Beckett thinks it possible that, after what has taken place, Miss Marvon may think it expedient to remove at once from Beckett House. This, in Mrs. Beckett's opinion, is not necessary, as the house is large enough to afford Miss Marvon accommodation and privacy without annoyance to any one. The inclosed cheque, due to Miss Marvon for her services, is simply sent for her personal convenience, and

by no means as a hint that her presence is no longer desirable. During the remainder of Miss Marvon's stay at Beckett House her meals will be served—since that arrangement will probably be more agreeable to her—in her own apartment.'

'Please to thank Mrs. Beckett, Simmons,' said Mary, softly, 'and say I will take advantage of her consideration; and be so good as to have this letter sent by the first post.'

Even as it was, she was touched by her hostess's note; and if she had known all—that is, how severely the widow's *amour propre* had been wounded—she would have regarded her late conduct with still greater charity. The fact was, as was remarked in the servants' hall, where opinion is in the main correct, 'My lady was not a bad sort.' Though, like most of her sex, she could be very 'small' upon occasions (or even when there was no occasion), her nature was not a petty one, and, albeit easily moved to passion, she was quick to repent of it. Nay, even when still angry, and very angry—

as in the present instance—she had a certain generosity of spirit towards the object of her dislike. She felt it would be a mean and cowardly action for one in her position to thrust forth from her doors, in doubt as to where she should lay her head, a poor and friendless girl, even though she had been her successful rival. She was her guest, too; and enough of simplicity of character remained to the widow to make her feel the duties of hospitality; perhaps she even confessed to herself that she was old enough to be Mary's mother, and that it was her duty to protect her. That remark about the house being large enough for two might even have been taken for conciliation, had the girl been inclined that way. Then, as to material matters, Mrs. Beckett had been generous; she had added a quarter's salary, in lieu of notice, to the money due to her late companion. This, however, through her perturbation of mind, had for the moment escaped Mary's attention.

Though the necessity for her departure

seemed no longer so pressing, she was very anxious to depart, and unwilling to wait till letters could be exchanged between herself and Mrs. Sotheran. The only friend except Charley, who, under the circumstances, was out of the question, upon whose advice she could rely in London, was Mr. Rennie. She had no claim upon him, indeed, whatever ; but his manner to her had been always so cordial—with a touch of the guardian too, which encouraged her even more than its cordiality—that she resolved to ask his aid. It was a very small thing she required of him—namely, a recommendation to some respectable lodging—but it was essential she should have it. She did not, of course, enter into the reasons which caused her to desire so immediate a change of quarters ; and she knew, even if Mr. Rennie should come to her, that he was far too reticent and judicious a man to compel her to give them. It would be enough for him to know that a breach had taken place between herself and her hostess that was irreparable. Curiously enough, while Mary

was penning her simple despatch to the worthy lawyer, her hostess was also writing a few lines to the same gentleman, upon a widely different subject, and dealing with much more important matters.

‘Dear Mr. Rennie,—I have been thinking over our conversation of this morning, and have come to the conclusion that your opinion is the correct one. You may consider my previous instructions—a copy of which you were so good as to send me—as cancelled. My engagement, of course, remains an accomplished fact ; but I shall not settle the fifty thousand pounds, nor, indeed, any sum, upon Mr. Dornay. Your suggestion that he should have a life interest out of the estate is, after all, the most reasonable, and will, I am sure, be quite satisfactory to him. I will communicate with you further upon the matter in a few days.

‘Yours most faithfully,

‘KATE BECKETT.’

‘What a fortunate thing it is,’ reflected the widow, as she sealed her letter, ‘that, though I admitted his name began with a D and ended with a Y, I never told Mr. Rennie which Mr. Dornay it was!’

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. SOTHERAN.

ALTHOUGH no immediate help or advice could be looked for from Letcombe Dottrell, the need for writing to Mrs. Sotheran seemed to Mary the most imperative of all the matters that pressed upon her attention. She had little doubt, since Mrs. Beckett had said so, that her parentage had not only been obscure but disgraceful. That it was more humble on the one side than on the other she had guessed for herself; partly from what Mrs. Sotheran had told her, and partly from her silence upon the subject. Either her father or her mother had, by their marriage, annoyed certain members of the family of one of them, and what was so

likely to have been the cause as an inequality of social position? The effect of this had been, she had been led to understand, disinheritance; and, having this fact in her mind, it is certain that if Edgar Dornay had had either father or mother to say him nay, Mary would never have consented to become his wife. But these conclusions of hers had, it now seemed, been drawn from wrong premisses, and Mrs. Sotheran had had a better (or worse) reason for her long reticence as respected her parents than she had ever suspected. It was necessary to resolve all doubt upon this matter, if doubt she could be said to have; though she had to face the world alone, she would do so under no false colours. Pretence and concealment were abhorrent to her. She almost thanked Mrs. Beckett for having opened her eyes, however roughly, to her true position. How terrible it would have been to have suffered Edgar's engagement to have gone on in ignorance of the stain of her birth! She was far, however, from being angry with Mrs. Sotheran, whose silence, she

well understood, had been dictated by kindness and consideration.

By the same post by which her note was despatched to Mr. Rennie she wrote to Letcombe Dottrell:—

‘My dear Mrs. Sotheran,—A very serious disagreement has taken place between Mrs. Beckett and myself which will at once necessitate my leaving her house; so be so good as to reply to me to the care of Mr. Rennie, who will be in possession of my address. Of the cause of quarrel I cannot write now at any length; let it suffice to say that Mrs. Beckett is angry with me for having encouraged the attentions of a visitor at her house, and has spoken to me upon the subject in such terms as renders any further communication with her impossible. It is not true that I encouraged his attentions: they were paid to me without the least encouragement; but it is quite true that, but for other circumstances to which it is now unnecessary to allude, I should have

accepted them. All that is over now ; but what most annoyed Mrs. Beckett, as she gave me to understand, was the difference in social position between myself and the gentleman in question. As I knew of no difference, save the mere conventional ones of rank and money, I defended myself from her reproaches with some spirit. I am not aware of it, but it is possible that I even lost my temper. Then she told me—what I certainly did not know, and which if I had known would have caused me to take a very different view of the case—that I was base-born, “nobody’s child,” as she termed it. Dear Mrs. Sotheran, do not think I blame you for having so long concealed so painful a fact from my knowledge : but is this true ? One word will be sufficient—“Yes,” or “No.” It would have been better, far better, had I known it before ; but it is absolutely necessary that I should know it now. It will make no difference to me ; nothing can make any difference to me.’

Here the girl uttered a deep sigh and laid

her pen down upon the table. That last sentence had expressed the whole state of the case as regarded her own feelings. Happy the man, and happier the woman, who has never been forced to utter, from the depths of a bruised heart, 'nothing can henceforth make any difference to me.' It is never true, of course; for everything makes a difference; but in that supreme hour of agony and despair in which we hear nothing but the mould upon Hope's coffin-lid, it seems to be true.

'I wish to know,' she went on, 'my true position in every respect. I have no expectations of any kind, so you need not be afraid of disappointing me. Dear Mrs. Sotheran, this is not, I feel, how I should write to so old and tried a friend, and one to whose kindness I owe so much. Forgive me and be frank with me. However low my lot may be in the world, let me at least stand on firm ground.

'Yours affectionately,

'MARY MARVON.'

The tongue of man is but a small member, yet (like Cromwell, who represented Huntingdon) what great things doth it effect! And even still more may this be said of the pen. It is of small consequence who writes with it; it is the thing written which does the work and remains. Who would think that a few words jotted down in despondency by a penniless girl just turned out of her situation, could affect any one but herself? Human society, however, is but as one great body full of nerves, sensitive in all its parts, and conscious even of a thorn in its foot—which is fortunate, for otherwise some of us would care little on what (or whom) we trod.

That missive of poor Mary's, a mere wail of impotent distress, dropped into the pillar-box by John Thomas with a sniff of contempt for the ex-companion—for every one knew she was 'going'—sorted with ten thousand others as though they were the rags from which they came, but each bearing its message of weal or woe, was fated to cause some commotion.

Its destination was a village in Dorsetshire ; its recipient, a widow of fifty-five or so, living in a cottage of gentility (though it had no double coach-house) called 'The Bank.' Any dwelling less like a bank it was difficult to imagine ; it was very slightly built, and, being in a part of the country where thieves were never known to break through and steal, it had neither bolt nor bar belonging to it. The front door was indeed religiously locked every night, but as the two windows on either side of it opened to the ground, and had only outside jalousies by way of shutters, the precaution was somewhat superfluous. Above it towered a huge sandbank (from which it took its name) pigeon-holed by sand-martins who kept the air about it in a perpetual twitter. A verandah festooned with creepers, now in blossom, ran round the front of the house, which commanded a lovely view. In the foreground, a pretty lawn and garden with a few noble trees ; beyond, a vast expanse of landscape with a misty line on the horizon, which was the sea.

Half-way down the hill on which the cottage was set was a confused mass of towers and turrets, betokening the presence of some stately mansion.

The mistress of the cottage, a faded and somewhat sickly looking lady, though with that expression of kindness and good-will which is the dower of a gentle and harmless nature, was watering some flowers in the verandah, when that quick, firm step (at once suggesting haste and burthen) which belongs to postmen, was heard upon the gravel sweep without. She looked up from her occupation with a flush of apprehension ; not that she expected bad news, but because from her temperament, and it must be added from her experience—for it had been a sad one—bad news always suggested itself to her more naturally than good news. At the sight of the missive the man put in her hand, however, her countenance resumed its usual expression. It was only a letter from Mary Marvon. She was glad it was not from Charley, for she had heard

from him the day before, and a second letter from him might have betokened something amiss. It did not strike her that there could be anything amiss with Mary.

The girl had fallen into her hands under what Mrs. Sotheran called 'very trying' circumstances; and had at first imposed upon her a responsibility which she had felt to be greater than she could bear; but from the date of that event—which still stood up in her life, otherwise barren of sensational incident, like a pyramid on a plain—all things had gone on smoothly (and far more so than she had ventured to expect) as regarded her young charge.

For eighteen years Mrs. Sotheran had carried the burthen of the secret of Mary Marvon's birth, shared with her by only one other person; and she was a woman as little fitted for secrets as a cat for draught. Not that she was a gossip—far from it; but she was timid and diffident, unequal to the weight of her own affairs, much more to conduct, or to be privy to, those of other people. She did

her duty, but always in fear and trembling, lest she should fall short of it. She had seen her husband and all her children, save Charley, fade and die ; she had fought the battle of life with narrow means and little strength, but still without absolute defeat ; and yet she shrank from its dangers as though she had been a young recruit, who had never heard a shot fired, or seen the moonbeams sleeping on the upturned faces of the dead. Her spirit was broken, her frame was weak ; she ‘ had had enough of it.’ Her one prayer to the Divine Mercy, save for Charley, would have been, ‘ Take me out of this.’

If there had not been other and stronger reasons for keeping Mary Marvon at a distance, she felt that she would have been no fit companion for a young girl, a flower that needs the sunshine ; but she had done her best for her elsewhere, and, on the whole, with success.

There had been no murmurs from Mary ; if there had been matters to complain of she

had concealed them, and above all she had not troubled her with questions about her past. The knowledge that her parents were dead, and that she had no relations who showed any solicitude about her, seemed sufficient for her. There would be some trouble about it doubtless when she married (Mrs. Sotheran always foresaw troubles long before the shadow of them fell upon her); but until then matters promised to go smoothly enough.

Mary's letters, therefore, were among the few things that did not agitate Mrs. Sotheran, or, to use her own homely phrase, 'put her into a pucker'—a moderately cold perspiration. In fact, she rather liked to hear from Mary, who wrote pleasant little records of her doings, anecdotes of the gay world, and opened for her, as it were, a door through which, without being herself observed, she could catch a glimpse of Vanity Fair. And not a letter had come without the narration of some kindness on Mrs. Beckett's part to her *protégée*, for which Mary seemed to thank her original pro-

tectress at second hand. As the morning was cool and balmy, Mrs. Sotheran did not go indoors to read her letter, but seated herself on one of the wicker chairs (a present from Charley) which stood on the lawn and afforded an excellent substitute for a garden-bench. She arranged herself, in short, for ten minutes' enjoyment.

Mary's first words, however—'A very serious disagreement has taken place between Mrs. Beckett and myself'—put to flight all hopes of repose. It was curious to see the physical effect produced upon the poor lady as she read on. At first her delicately pencilled eyebrows rose on her forehead and her thin lips emitted a deprecating murmur: 'Dear, dear, what a pity!' Then her features began to stiffen, as it were, into stone; a look of inexpressible pain and fear came into her eyes; and, presently, she dropped the letter on her lap with a groan of dismay. 'Base-born!' Then the secret was out at last—or at least some of it, for that the whole should have to be

told was even now a thing not to be thought of. One word said to this poor girl would be sufficient, it seemed—‘Yes,’ or ‘No’; and for that moderation on Mary’s part, ill as they had played her, Mrs. Sotheran thanked her stars. It would not at least be necessary to enter into explanations. On the other hand, Mary had concluded her communication with the words, ‘Be frank with me. However low my lot may be in the world, let me at least stand on firm ground.’

Alas! there was nothing firm for her to stand on; all was quicksand.

As Mrs. Sotheran pondered over the letter, with her eyes fixed on the landscape before her, it faded from her view, and in its place there grew this picture: A small low room sparsely furnished but scrupulously clean; a bed on which lay a young woman, worn with woe and haggard with unceasing pain, but still of exquisite beauty. It was the beauty, however, which death covets; the pallor of the tomb was on her brow; the hectic—Nature’s flag of

distress—burnt on her cheek, and the voice was broken and feeble with which she pleaded, ‘You will take care of my child, dear friend, till her father comes to claim her?’

‘I will,’ Mrs. Sotheran had answered eagerly; something had almost prompted her to add, ‘I will take care of her whether he comes or not;’ for in her heart she did not believe that he would ever come. Twenty-four hours earlier the idea of such a responsibility would have appalled her, and she would have shrunk from it; but a very little time suffices to alter human intentions, whether for good or ill. The receipt of a telegram; a hurried journey; the finding of an old acquaintance, poor, deserted, and at the point of death, had changed the Mrs. Sotheran of yesterday into another woman. She regarded her dying companion with pitiful, yearning eyes; and presently, as though her emotions of compassion could be pent up no longer, she burst into a great sob. ‘I did at least hope that he would have married you, my poor, dear girl.’

The hectic flush broadened a little on either cheek ; the large eyes, lit with the fever within, became bedewed with tears, and shone like the sun-dew. She raised a skeleton finger for silence. ‘Very good, my dear,’ continued Mrs. Sotheran ; ‘I will not say a word against him ; it will not be with me that he will have to deal, but with Another. But I do hope that he has made whatever provision lay in his power for the babe.’

The speaker’s eye had wandered to a little desk of solid workmanship and bound with steel, as though in that repository might be the legal document at which she hinted.

The dying woman’s face had turned to the same direction.

‘Do you want the desk, my dear?’ The shake of the still shapely head, from which the clustering curls had been ruthlessly shorn, was almost imperceptible ; but the other gathered from it that it was not the desk that was wanted.

‘The child is asleep,’ said Mrs. Sotheran,

pointing to a cradle that stood close beside her.

Again there was a shake of the head, and the eyes sought the same object as before.

The only object on the table except the desk was a little Bible ; she accordingly brought that to the bedside.

‘ Kiss it, kiss it,’ murmured the dying woman : ‘ swear to me that you will never seek to learn the contents of that desk, without my—without his—permission.’

Then Mrs. Sotheran did what was very difficult for her—she took courage. It would have been much more easy for her to give the required promise ; but the reflection that such a course might injuriously affect the child’s interest occurred to her ; it must be added, too, that a righteous indignation was burning in her heart against the man of whom they spoke.

‘ Do you say this, my poor girl, out of fear ? There is none you need fear now but God, remember ; and I humbly hope His wrath has ceased against you.’

‘I do not say it out of fear,’ answered the other in clearer tones, her anxiety to set this matter right seeming to give her a momentary strength; ‘I say it out of love; not for his sake,’ for Mrs. Sotheran’s face had involuntarily darkened, ‘but for the child’s.’

Then Mrs. Sotheran kissed the book and gave the promise required of her.

It is needless to say she had kept it. Even if, under such solemn circumstances, she had passed her word only, it would not have been broken; but an oath had for Mrs. Sotheran a signification which, to those accustomed to courts of justice, would have been unintelligible. She really did believe that whomsoever should break it, God would no longer ‘help.’ To her mind it had even something of the supernatural in it; it was the one supreme occasion on which, since the age of miracles was past, man and his Creator could still make a compact together. If Mary Marvon’s inquiries had required for their answer that Mrs. Sotheran should open that desk, they

would without doubt have remained unsatisfied.

Her heart, albeit as tender a one as ever beat in woman's breast, would have been as the nether millstone as regarded any such appeal; and this, although the man was dead concerning whom the promise had been given that the desk should not be opened till he came to claim it, and had been dead for many a year.

It was here that the narrowness of this good woman's mind stood out like a ridge of rock in a fertile field. She clung to the letter and not to the spirit; not, as is the case with most of us, from baseness of disposition, but simply because the letter was dear to her and the spirit was not. The whole incident, contrasting as it did in its dramatic force with the even tenor of her life, had made a very deep impression on her. To one person only she had breathed it, though, even in that case, without mention of her oath; and this enforced reticence had swelled its proportions. But, as

time rolled on and nothing had come of it, apprehension had ceased ; the matter had lain so long undisturbed in its pigeon-hole, under the dust of years, that it was quite unnoticed—till Mary's letter came, which taught poor Mrs. Sotheran with iron rod that 'there is no such thing as forgetting.'

The perturbation of her mind was such that it was long before she could decide on any course of action ; but, in the end, she rose, and, putting on her bonnet, went out.

Her way led down a winding road between high wooded banks, which after a mile or more reached the plain as a river debouches on the sea ; but half-way down she stopped before some high gates, finely wrought in iron and richly gilded. Without waiting for the lodge-keeper to admit her, she opened a side door and walked rapidly on ; her mind was too fully occupied to take note of external objects ; otherwise, albeit the scene was familiar to her, it could hardly have failed to extort her admiration. She was passing through an avenue of

oaks, on one side of which lay a well-wooded park with herds of deer ; on the other a landscape of exquisite beauty that sloped 'with lessening fields and farms' to the dim, far-off ocean.

Immediately in front, but at the end of a long descent (as became so stately a pile), stood Letcombe Hall, 'the seat' (as it was called in the county history) of the Peyton family, now, alas! bidding fair to be extinct. The grounds about it, of which a complete bird's-eye view was now obtained, were laid out in antique fashion with walled gardens, a huge rosery, and—instead of a croquet or lawn-tennis ground—a bowling-green as smooth as a billiard-table ; all these had their various tenants, male and female ; some seated with books in their hands, some walking, some playing, but all conveying a certain undefined impression that they were no transitory guests. As every one did what they pleased at Letcombe Hall, it was called by some folks 'Holiday House' ; but there were people of a

cynical turn who, in allusion to the heterogeneous character of its inmates, termed it the 'Menagerie.'

What struck one most, perhaps, as one watched these persons all enjoying themselves in the sunshine (if idleness is enjoyment) was the absence of child-life. The laugh of a child would have cleared the moral atmosphere about this Castle of Indolence, which, truth to say, hung somewhat heavily on it. But, alas! there were no children at Letcombe Hall. As a young gentleman, to whom we have already been introduced, was wont to say of the place, 'It was magnificent, no doubt, but too much like a first-class madhouse.'

The building itself was of immense proportions, and, being quite white, shone like a star for many a mile. Round three fourths of it ran a gigantic stone verandah on pillars of stone, so that all the rooms below were cool on the hottest of summer days, and every room above had a spacious balcony.

Before reaching the front door Mrs. Sotheran

met more than one group of people and several pairs, all of whom seemed to recognise her. She acknowledged their salutations, but hurried on with frightened looks, without exchanging a word with them. Always shy and retiring, she was on the present occasion extremely apprehensive of meeting a certain person; a fear, as it happened—like most of this poor lady's fears—entirely groundless. She had a habit, however, common enough with persons of her type, of endeavouring to meet her terrors half way, as if by so doing they could be mitigated; and this it was which caused her to inquire, having rung the front door bell with a trembling hand, whether the master of the house was within.

‘No, ma’am,’ returned the butler, with severe civility. ‘Mr. Peyton left for town this morning.’

Mrs. Sotheran uttered a sigh of intense relief, which, indeed, shaped itself into the words ‘Thank heaven!’ She looked so grave and earnest that the man added, ‘Some of Mr.

Peyton's people are to follow by the next train. Perhaps they can take a message.'

'No, no, *no!*' returned Mrs. Sotheran, eagerly. If she could have contrived that they should tell him that she had *not* called, that was the statement she would have confided to them. 'I will see your mistress.'

'Mrs. Peyton has gone with master to London,' returned the butler.

'Gone! Mrs. Peyton gone!' This was terrible and quite unexpected news. The mistress of Letcombe Hall scarcely ever left it, and when she did so it was for the Continent. London, for certain reasons of which Mrs. Sotheran was fully cognisant, was distasteful to her.

'Miss Gwynne is within,' continued the man, taking compassion on the visitor's evident distress. 'But, as you have doubtless heard, Miss Gwynne is about to leave the Hall.'

'I know, I know,' said Mrs. Sotheran. She did know that the young lady alluded to, Mrs. Peyton's companion, was no longer on the

establishment, since she was going to be married to the vicar of the parish, but she was not really thinking about Miss Gwynne at all.

‘And when is your mistress expected back?’

‘In about three weeks, I believe, ma’am.’

Mrs. Sotheran nodded and turned away; she had hardly strength enough even to nod, while the information she had just received had literally taken her breath away. Three weeks of self-dependence—which was self-torture—therefore awaited her! Three weeks of unaided reflection! For to write of Mary’s letter to the person it mainly concerned she felt was impossible. To commit such a thing to paper was, or might be, ‘publication,’ from which she shrank as though it involved ten actions for libel. If she had but had Mary’s letter yesterday, half the burthen would have by this time been off her shoulders; but, as it was, she must needs bear it alone, and it seemed to crush her to the earth.

On her return she had to run the gauntlet

of the guests at the Hall, but this time she felt no embarrassment: in the presence of a great fear the minor emotions sink into insignificance. To all outward appearance she was now as little troubled with *mauvaise honte* as these ladies and gentlemen themselves, whom the departure of their host and hostess had affected not in the least.

Mr. Beryl Peyton was often away from home. Letcombe Hall was like the decapitated lady in the German story—everything went on just the same as though it had not lost its head. As for Mrs. Peyton, though one or two simple folks besides Mrs. Sotheran had a genuine regard for her, she was considered by the company at the Hall, who were all eminent and distinguished persons in their way, as a nonentity.

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK TUESDAY.

THE Tuesday on which poor Mrs. Sotheran's repose at Letcombe Dottrell was so rudely broken in upon by Mary Marvon's letter was also a black Tuesday for some other acquaintances of ours. Though Mr. Ralph Dornay had fulfilled his nephew's mission so successfully in Park Lane (not forgetting that little incidental stroke of business on his own account), all was not rose colour with him. He was under a promise to return forthwith to the Aglaia Club to inform his young relative how he had sped upon his errand ; and this was not an agreeable thing to look forward to. He had done what he had been required to do, it was true ; but he had also slightly exceeded

his instructions. As to his wooing of the widow, that was his own affair, and one, moreover, that was not likely to transpire very quickly; but the consciousness that he had intrusted her with Mary Marvon's letter made him a little uncomfortable, not because of the breach of trust involved in it, but of the possible consequences. Uncle Ralph took it for granted that Mrs. Beckett would read the letter, and that then there would be a row with Mary. Of course Mary would stick to Edgar; she knew too well on which side her bread was buttered to do otherwise; and she would certainly inform him that Mrs. Beckett had been his uncle's postmistress. An explanation of that circumstance would then be demanded of him, and Ralph foresaw that there might be a serious misunderstanding—he even termed it, as he revolved the idea in his own mind, 'a rough and tumble'—with his young relative.

The ties of blood, as we know, were dear to him; if the phrase 'thicker than water' was to be erased from his vocabulary it would

be a serious hiatus ;—but still that might even happen, and welcome, if he could only make sure of the widow. He had made a great step towards that goal, but he had not reached it. And of the truth of the proverb that ‘there’s many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip’ he had had a very recent experience in Edgar’s own case. It behoved him for the present, at least, like a villain in a melodrama, ‘to dissemble.’

Anything less like a villain than Mr. Ralph Dornay looked, however, as he entered the apartment at the Aglaia Club common to himself and nephew, it was difficult to imagine. His jaunty step, his assuring smile, and the cheerfulness of the tone in which he said, ‘Edgar, my boy, I congratulate you,’ all spoke of a mind at ease and of the consciousness of benefits conferred upon a fellow-creature.

‘What a capital fellow you are!’ cried Edgar, taking his outstretched hand, and pressing it eagerly. ‘You’ve seen her, of course?’

‘I should rather think I had.’

‘Well, what am I to do? When am I to come? I can’t see her in Park Lane, of course.’

‘Well, I should think not. What the deuce should you want to see her for?’

‘Want to see her for? What a question! Of course I want to see Mary.’

Then Uncle Ralph perceived his mistake.

‘Oh, the girl,’ he said; ‘I thought you meant the widow—it was the widow, you will be good enough to remember, to whom you sent me; I did not go to her on my own account.’

‘Of course not; I had forgotten,’ said Edgar, turning very red. ‘So the widow’s all right, is she?’

‘I hope she is; I did my very best for you, but let me tell you it was a very ticklish job. That is, I mean, it looked so. However, as it turns out, it was all a mistake.’

‘What was a mistake? That she asked me to marry her?’

In the excitement of the moment Edgar

forgot that he had never disclosed this fact to his uncle.

‘If she did that, it most certainly was a mistake, a very great mistake,’ said Uncle Ralph, gravely. ‘I think, however, that must have been a conclusion, Edgar, which—ahem!——’ Here he hesitated; the sentence was difficult to round, but, nerved perhaps by some association of ideas, he presently added, ‘which you must have rather jumped at.’

‘Well, well, the point is that you have got me out of it,’ said Edgar, impatiently. ‘It would certainly have been a terrible business to have become entangled with a woman of that kind. I confess I should not have liked to have been ticketed “Fortune hunter” for the rest of my days, which would most certainly have happened.’

‘Considering the great disparity in your years, no doubt disagreeable things might have been said,’ admitted Uncle Ralph.

‘The disparity in years was nothing, my good sir; on the contrary, that would have

been something to the credit side of my account: it was my want of money that made it so dreadful.'

'Want of money is always dreadful,' replied Uncle Ralph; 'people who have got lots of it don't understand that. You should have seen Mrs. Beckett tear that cheque of yours to pieces; it would have been just the same had it been a 500*l.* note. However, her little feeling of irritation was soon over.'

'Indeed,' said Edgar, drily. He was glad that he was free, but he would not have been displeased had his enfranchisement cost the widow a struggle.

'Yes; she said that such a misapprehension on your part was an impertinence, but that young men would be young men.'

'Which no doubt was her objection to them,' said Edgar, cynically.

'It was a very natural objection to them in one in her position,' returned Uncle Ralph, who thought he saw an opportunity of hinting without offence at his own recent proceedings.

‘If Mrs. Beckett ever marries again, it would be, as she gave me to understand, some person of mature years and good connections, but with nothing particular about him which should cause her to be talked about in any way.’

‘Such a person as Mr. Ralph Dornay, for example,’ observed Edgar, scornfully.

‘She might do worse,’ said Uncle Ralph, with a slight flush; ‘indeed, but for me (as we have seen) she *would* have done worse.’

Edgar Dornay knew something of women, but a great deal more about men. ‘So so: you have been making a stepping-stone of your prostrate friend to higher things, have you, Mr. Ralph?’ he said, with bitter significance. ‘However, *my* honour is not concerned in *that* matter. Did you give my note to Miss Marvon?’

‘I left it for her, sir.’ Here there was a knock at the door; it was generally Uncle Ralph who said ‘Come in,’ as he performed all other little offices that took trouble off his

nephew's shoulders. But he now turned to the window, and, playing on the pane with his fingers, began to whistle a popular melody. Edgar opened the door himself, and took a note from the servant's hand. At the sight of the superscription his heart went pit-a-pat, just as though, instead of being a member of the Aglaia Club, which, to say truth, was a somewhat 'used up' and *nil admirari* society, he was a young man from the country receiving his first epistle from his Dulcinea. He felt inclined to put his hand in his pocket and (though contrary to the regulations of the establishment) give the waiter who brought it a sovereign. Fortunately he restrained himself, or he would certainly have regretted his generosity.

'Dear Sir,—Mrs. Beckett has just handed me your letter, as well as your note of Saturday addressed to herself. I have no more to say to you, save that I wish you well.

'Yours sincerely,

'MARY MARVON.'

Edgar turned upon his uncle like a wild cat.

‘You are a most infernal scoundrel, Mr. Ralph Dornay.’

‘Sir—Edgar—you must have lost your senses.’

‘No, sir ; so far as you are concerned, at least, I have found them. If there is one word of truth in you, answer me this. To whom did you give my letter to Mary?’

‘To herself, of course. That is to say,’ he stammered, ‘I would have done so had I had the opportunity. She was out, and so I left it for her.’

In whose hands? You gave it to Mrs. Beckett. You may deny it or not, as you please ; I say, you gave it to Mrs. Beckett.’

Edgar Dornay piqued himself on his aristocratic immobility ; but his manner just now had anything but that ‘repose which marks the stamp of Vere de Vere.’ Uncle Ralph, however, was not afraid of him ; to do him justice, he was no coward.

‘I had no alternative,’ he answered quietly ; ‘she insisted upon it ; you have no idea what a state she was in.’

Edgar Dornay flung open the door, and, pointing to the staircase, exclaimed in a voice of thunder, ‘Go !’

‘Pooh ! pooh ! my good fellow,’ said the other, bestowing his massive frame on an arm-chair, from which it would have been difficult to remove him without mechanical appliances ; ‘if you talk of going, the notice to quit must come from me. If you choose to step down to the manager’s room, you will find that the registered occupant of these apartments is myself, and that you are only a lodger.’

Edgar paused ; for one moment he thought of precipitating himself upon Uncle Ralph, and administering that mysterious punishment called ‘condign’ upon his portly person, but more prudent counsels prevailed.

‘You treacherous blackguard !’ he simply said, and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Uncle Ralph drew a long breath, and wiped his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief.

‘There, that’s over,’ he muttered; ‘I’ve burnt my boats. I had no idea that Edgar had such a temper. He has not behaved like a gentleman, much less like a Dornay. It is plain that that girl has been comparing letters and rejected him. The words applied to me by my own nephew were “treacherous black-guard.” How true it is,’ he added, as he lit a cigar, ‘that women are at the bottom of every mischief in this world.’

Nevertheless, though he took things with such philosophy, neither that evening nor the next day were such as could be marked with white in the calendar of Uncle Ralph. We can also imagine that the feelings of his nephew Edgar, houseless and for the present compelled to put up with such accommodation as could be afforded by an hotel, were not very enviable.

At Beckett House, too, matters were very

melancholy. Mr. Rennie was away from London on business, drawing up marriage settlements for some country client, or assisting, with the same imperturbable face, at his interment, and would not be at home till the next day, so that both Mary's letter to him, and that of Mrs. Beckett, necessarily remained unanswered. The two women sat alone and apart, revolving many things in their sad hearts. There were no visitors except Mr. Ralph Dornay, who came to luncheon with the widow as agreed upon.

She sat with him in the dining-room for some time after the meal was over, as she had sat with Edgar three days ago; but with very different feelings. She had quite resolved to marry Uncle Ralph, and told him so without the least embarrassment or reserve; but he was not so foolish as to indulge in raptures. Like the young lady in humble life, chronicled by Mr. Locker, who thought in her humility that matrimony was 'too good for the likes of her,' he was really somewhat overwhelmed by

his own good fortune, and this feeling gave him the very manner which was, perhaps, under the circumstances, the most agreeable to the widow. Sir Walter Raleigh, after that successful sacrifice of his cloak to the mud, might have so behaved himself to Queen Elizabeth. The widow told him frankly that it was her intention to remain her own mistress and have the spending of her own money; and that in case of her demise he would by no means find himself a millionaire. A less intelligent lover would have protested that, if death took her from him, wealth or poverty would be equally indifferent to him; but Uncle Ralph only said that whatever arrangements she might choose to make would be acceptable to him, and would, in any case, be far beyond his deserts or expectations.

‘There is only one thing,’ he said gravely, ‘which I have to regret in this hour of happiness; I am afraid it will cost me my nephew’s affection.’

The widow looked at him with angry eyes,

as though she would have said, 'What if it does?'

'You see he has not only lost you, madam, but through his very foolish and injudicious conduct he has also lost Miss Marvon.'

'She has rejected him, has she?' flashed out the widow. It was for her the happiest moment of the interview.

'Yes, she has rejected him; and he lays his misfortunes at my door, because I gave you his letter to Miss Marvon.'

This was Uncle Ralph's best stroke. Mrs. Beckett knew the value set by him upon 'family connections,' and appreciated what he had done accordingly. He had actually laid her under an obligation.

'You will not have to regret, Mr. Dornay,' she said, with a magnificent significance, 'the having risked a quarrel with your nephew for my sake.'

'I shall certainly never regret it,' he replied, with an inclination of his head and a drop in his voice; '"blood is thicker than

water," but there are claims which are even less to be denied than those of kindred.'

This speech, on which Uncle Ralph plumed himself very much, was unhappily lost upon the widow, who had by this time—so swift and slantwise are the thoughts of women—lost sight of him and his self-sacrifice altogether.

'She communicated with him, I suppose, by letter?' observed Mrs. Beckett, abruptly.

'She? who? oh, Miss Marvon. Yes. She gave it him pretty stiff, I fancy.'

Uncle Ralph had been so utterly thrown off his guard by the widow's change of front that he forgot to keep up his heroic vein; while, moreover, the remembrance of his nephew's behaviour disinclined him to mince matters.

'Mary has plenty of spirit,' observed Mrs. Beckett, approvingly. She would have been better pleased if Edgar had jilted Mary; but even as it was, there was much to be thankful for. However it had come about, Mary was not going to have him. From that moment remorse for her treatment of the young girl

awoke in her breast. She would have settled a thousand a year on her at once, with a great deal of pleasure.

Unhappily, however, one cannot liquidate everything by cheque.

As Mrs. Beckett and Mr. Dornay passed through the hall on their way upstairs, who should be standing there, hat in hand, but Mr. Charles Sotheran. The meeting was most embarrassing for the widow, but she smiled and held out her hand to him in the old way.

‘Why, Charley, what brings you here?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ he stammered; ‘that is, as I was crossing the Park, I just looked in. They told me you were not at home. It’s of no consequence.’

‘There must have been some mistake in your case, though it is true I did deny myself to ordinary visitors,’ said the widow, quietly. ‘What is it, Simmons?’

My lady’s lady’s-maid having just descended from the upper regions, was standing in the

doorway that led from the servants' rooms with a hesitating look.

‘Only a message from Miss Marvon for Mr. Sotheran, my lady : her kind regards, but she feels too indisposed to see him.’

‘Yes, I know poor Miss Marvon has a headache,’ said the widow, addressing Charley with an assuring smile ; ‘perhaps another day.’

‘Just so ; I’ll call again,’ said Charley, retiring with much precipitation.

It was not to be expected that the young man should have his wits so much at command as a lady of fifty and of fashion ; but he was an intelligent fellow, and could give a shrewd guess at what had happened.

‘By Jingo ! there *has* been a row,’ was his muttered exclamation as soon as he found himself on the outside of the front door. ‘She called Mary “Miss Marvon.” But what can be the meaning of that mediæval Adonis being alone with Mrs. Beckett when she is denied to visitors ? She surely never *can*——’

He did not complete the sentence, because

some picture presented itself to his mind (which was of a humorous cast) that caused him to burst into a roar of laughter.

Mrs. Beckett heard it, for it came through the open window into her drawing-room ; but, luckily for Charley, or even perhaps for Uncle Ralph, she did not guess its cause.

CHAPTER XV.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

ON Wednesday morning Mary got her letter from Letcombe Dottrell. She had not much hope that it would do otherwise than confirm her fears as to her parentage; still she had a hope. To the philosopher it is, or should be, a matter of no consequence by what means he comes into the world; it is one of those questions which does not concern him personally at all, but is peculiar to the preceding generation; but then we are not all philosophic. No man, indeed, who is not an absolute fool, thinks any less of a fellow-creature because of his birth, since it is a matter beyond his own control. But unhappily there are so many fools amongst us that they form a sort of spurious

public opinion such as prevails in schools which are said to have a 'bad tone.' It is impossible, indeed, for persons who have the bar sinister on their shields not to be aware of the prejudice that exists against them among this class of persons ; and, if they are of a sensitive disposition, it rankles in them, as though a man should blush for shame because he hears it whispered, 'that fellow has red hair.' Mary Marvon, for example, felt that it would be a great aggravation of her unhappy lot in the world to find herself illegitimate.

'My dear Mary,' wrote Mrs. Sotheran, 'your letter has distressed me beyond expression. If I am to answer your most painful question by the simple "yes" or "no," which you request of me, I must needs say "yes"; for alas, it is true that you are illegitimate. I cannot, however, confine myself to that bald statement of fact, and, on the other hand, I scarcely know how much, or how little, I ought to say. The circumstances of your birth are known only to myself and one other living person ; they are

a secret which I am under a solemn promise never to disclose; but this much I may tell you, or rather, since you insist upon learning “your true position in the world,” I needs must: your parents were of widely different social rank, but have long gone to that world where there are no such distinctions; they have passed, remember, beyond our judgment; it is no longer necessary to be just when you think of them, but only to be kind and pitiful. Your mother, though she sinned through love, is now an angel. As sure as there is a Heaven, Mary, she is there. Your father—well, I will only say of him that your mother forgave him the wrong he did her, and loved him to the last. It was from the apprehension, my dear girl, that you might press me upon this unhappy subject, that I have not done for you all I might have done; that, in particular, I have seemed to fall short (for one thing) in the exercise of hospitality towards you. And yet (though I cannot explain this matter) I was not prompted in this by selfish motives only.

As regards your future prospects, I may say that they are somewhat better than you have been led to expect. I thought it best—I have done everything for what I thought was for the best, believe me—to make little of your expectations; but as a matter of fact you will be always out of the reach of want. A member of your father's family has hitherto supplied the means for your maintenance—not grudgingly, but as a cheerful giver—and will continue to supply it.'

'Never,' exclaimed Mary, striking the letter vehemently with a passionate hand. 'Never, so help me Heaven, will I take one farthing from that source!' Her face was suffused with a burning blush. Her very heart seemed hot with shame.

'For your present necessity,' continued Mrs. Sotheran, 'in case you may be in want of money, I inclose five five-pound notes of which I have a store in trust for you. Charley will see you to-morrow concerning a temporary home; there are some good people from this

parish who let lodgings in London, with whose address he will furnish you. It is terrible that you should be driven from your present quarters so suddenly, so unreasonably, so unjustly ; but I can see that you must leave them without delay. Mrs. Beckett has not written to me ; a sure sign (if I needed it) of her being in the wrong in this matter ; what she told you she had no right to say, in any sense. She did not know it to be true, since, as I have said, only one person beside myself is in possession of the secret of your birth. O Mary, believe that my heart is with you, though I have no words to say so. And if there is no counsel in this letter such as you have a right to look for, do not suppose that it will not come ; but I must have time to think and plan what is best to be done.

‘ Ever yours,

‘ JANE SOTHERAN.’

The effect of Mrs. Sotheran’s letter upon Mary Marvon, although its contents had been

anticipated and therefore discounted, was peculiar. It softened her heart towards her unknown mother ; awoke in her all sorts of tender feelings towards the poor and unprotected of her own sex, such as even her charity had not previously included ; but it hardened her against her father. Mr. Beryl Peyton would have highly approved of her sentiments in this respect. The tie of blood—so far from its having any cementing quality with her—had an attraction of repulsion. She dwelt upon it in spite of herself, but she never wished to hear it spoken of by others. If Mrs. Sotheran could have looked into her heart she would have had no fear of an embarrassing question from her young friend's lips ; on the subject of her birth they were henceforth sealed. It was a satisfaction to her to reflect that Mrs. Beckett had no real knowledge of the matter ; and she was less angry with her for her pretence of possessing it than she would have been had she actually done so.

Again, though Mrs. Sotheran's communica-

tion pained her in some respects, it acted as a tonic, strengthening her to endure the hardness of others. She had learnt within that last half-hour to suffer and be strong. The world had no longer any joys to offer, but she had henceforth one passionate desire—to make herself independent of it. It was terrible to her to reflect that she had hitherto been supported by her father's relatives ; it seemed to her like living on the wages of her mother's shame. From whose hand she had received them she had no curiosity to inquire. Mrs. Sotheran's assurance that they had been ungrudgingly given awoke no sentiment of gratitude. If the donor imagined that he had made reparation to her for another's wrong he was mistaken. The desire of her soul was to work till she had earned the whole sum to the last farthing, and then to fling it back to him. She would have liked to have put those five five-pound notes into an envelope and return them by the next post, but she felt that her possession of them would the sooner enable her to repay the whole debt.

She had already a plan in her mind for gaining a maintenance, but money was necessary for her to start with. Mrs. Beckett's cheque would indeed suffice for that ; but these twenty-five pounds, being the exact sum she needed for a certain purpose, would give her an immense advantage in her race for wealth.

Mrs. Sotheran's allusion to counsel to come was as clear as daylight to her. It was evident that that person was not at hand from whom it was natural that she should seek advice, and without whom, in material matters, she could not stir. That person would never be troubled for help or counsel any more. As for Mrs. Sotheran, Mary felt nothing but love and gratitude for her ; albeit she had not seen the tears which that poor lady had shed over her own communication, and knew nothing of the pains and labour she had spent upon it, with a result far from satisfactory to herself ; for her reflection, when all was said, had been similar to that indulged in by the gentleman in liquor, ' too much, yet not enough.'

From her window, which commanded a view of Park Lane, Mary presently saw Mr. Rennie arrive in a hansom. He did not come upstairs for many minutes, during which she waited for him with a calmness which amazed herself. It arose perhaps from the fact that she had come to the end of her emotions. She had gone through so much within the last twenty-four hours that only the dregs of feeling were left within her. There was nothing more of moment—or what seemed to her of moment—to be discussed. She could trust Mr. Rennie's discretion, if not his delicacy, not to pry into matters that would give her pain. She had heard him converse with Mrs. Beckett, upon matters connected with her two marriages, with the most admirable adroitness, which he owed partly to experience in his profession, partly to his own good taste, and partly to the fact that he had long disencumbered himself of curiosity; and she took it for granted that his present delay was caused by her hostess, who had waylaid him upon his way to her.

(Here she was wrong. The lawyer had business with the widow, as we know, upon her own account, though it was true there was no great hurry about that. She was not so eager now concerning those matrimonial arrangements respecting Uncle Ralph as she had been when they concerned his nephew.)

Of course, Mrs. Beckett would tell the story of their quarrel in her own way; but Mary had confidence in the lawyer's astuteness to see through what was false in it; and if he did not do so, what did it matter? What did anything matter? Still, when she heard Simmons's step upon the stairs, followed by a heavier tread, the bruised heart of the poor girl beat more quickly. Though she had been beaten on the wheel so long she had not had her *coup de grâce*; she was still sensitive to pain. The door opened: 'Please, ma'am, Mr. Sotheran to see you.' It was Charley.

The young man was very pale, and wore a look of distress and pain that was very foreign to his countenance.

‘Good heavens, Mary! What is this?’ he inquired in tender yet excited tones.

‘What is what?’ said Mary. Her words were cold and hushed as falling snow. She had become frigid in a moment. It was the miracle of Pygmalion reversed. The sight of him, strange to say, had at once brought Edgar and her dead love to her remembrance. To speak of him in this young man’s presence was impossible.

‘Why, your going away? your quarrel with Mrs. Beckett?’ continued Charley. ‘Is it not true, then—what my mother writes me?’

‘That there has been a quarrel? No. That I am going to leave Beckett House? Yes. We have agreed to part, that is all. It is a subject I cannot discuss.’

‘Of course not; why should you do so? As though I did not know on whose side the fault lies.’

‘There was no fault, Charley.’

She could not ignore his partisanship, or rather the affection that prompted it; but it

pained her. Perhaps he thought, now Edgar was uprooted from her heart, that he might replace him there. If so, it was a mistake indeed; nothing would ever grow where that love had grown. Still Charley meant kindly.

‘There was no fault,’ she answered; ‘or rather, I should say, there were faults on both sides. Mrs. Beckett said things which she should not have said, which perhaps she already repents of saying, and I forgot in my anger that she had previously shown great kindness to me.’

‘It did not cost her much, and she could well afford it,’ said Charley, bitterly; ‘moreover, she was repaid ten times over, as I mean to tell her. For once in her life she shall hear the truth.’

‘Charley, Charley, remember what you owe her.’

‘I do,’ he answered grimly. ‘I am going to give her a present in return for it—a piece of my mind as a parting gift.’

‘You speak like a boy, and a spoilt boy,’

said Mary, severely. 'I will not urge that in doing as you propose you will deprive yourself of a powerful friend, for such an argument would only make you more obstinate. You imagine that you are about to make a self-sacrifice, instead of which you are merely about to indulge your inclination and flatter your own independence by a display of indignation. I am willing to believe,' she added more mildly, touched by his pained look, 'that you are also actuated by a regard for myself; if that be so, you will show it best by taking no action in this matter, which concerns Mrs. Beckett and myself only.'

'I will never do anything you do not wish, Mary,' answered the young man, humbly.

The diplomacy of this rejoinder, though the probate clerk did not know it, would have done credit to the Foreign Office; for in showing his obedience to Mary's behest he had delicately indicated his own devotion.

'In the letter from my mother,' he went on, 'she spoke of Mrs. Wilder, who used to be

at Letcombe Dottrell, and who has apartments to let near Russell Square. It is not so fashionable as Park Lane, but very convenient.' Here the young man blushed from the consciousness that he lodged within a few streets of the house in question. 'I have been to look at the place this morning: it will be a great change from this, I need not say.' And he looked round the walls of the bright little room with a half-sigh.

'I can get on without leather picked out in gold, and a dado,' said Mary, smiling. 'But I am afraid even Mrs. Wilder's establishment will be beyond my means, Charley.'

'Oh no; here are her terms.' He produced a card; 'It's as cheap as—I mean quite cheap and *clean*,' he said, with an earnestness born of his narrow escape from the vulgar metaphor. 'They're country people, you know.'

'A thousand thanks; I'll think about it, and let you know, Charley.'

'Do, Mary; remember, it's very convenient. Can I do anything more for you—*anything*?'

‘No, Charley, not at present. I must wish you good-bye now. Mr. Rennie is coming to see me on business.’

That gentleman indeed was at the door as they shook hands at parting. He shot one glance at the two young people—which erred on the side of comprehensiveness, since it took in somewhat more than had taken place—and settled down to business as the door closed.

‘So you are going to “flit,” Miss Mary?’

The abruptness of his inquiry was more than atoned for by the kindness of the lawyer’s tone. It made her understand at once that whatever the widow had said to him it had not prejudiced him against herself; while, on the other hand, it freed her from all embarrassment; it was clear that no questions were to be asked.

‘Yes, Mr. Rennie; if you will be so good as to recommend some respectable lodgings, I shall be deeply obliged; I felt that I had no right to trouble you on such a matter, but I had no other friend to whom I could apply.’

‘I should not have thought that from what I saw just now,’ observed the lawyer, with a twinkle at the corners of his mouth.

‘Oh, as to Charley,’ said Mary, with the least tinge of a blush, ‘he is scarcely old enough to be an adviser. I never even thought of him. He called upon his own account—that is, in consequence of a letter from his mother.’

‘To be sure : Mrs. Sotheran is of course aware of your intention to change your quarters.’

‘Yes ; she has suggested that I should make use of some acquaintance of hers who lets lodgings ; but her terms are too expensive ; very far indeed beyond my means.’

‘I should have thought Mrs. Sotheran would have been as good a judge of that matter as yourself ; being a housekeeper, perhaps even a better judge.’

‘Every one knows his own affairs best,’ said Mary, stiffly.

‘That is a principle which no lawyer can admit for a moment, my dear young lady. However, let us grant it to save time. I know one or two lodging-houses that are not dens of

thieves. It is a question of price. What do you wish to pay a week ? ’

Mary named so small a sum that the lawyer almost opened his eyes. ‘ I shall not require a sitting-room,’ she explained hastily. ‘ You must know that I have a very slender purse.’

‘ Young people do not always understand their own position,’ said the lawyer, gently ; ‘ it is true that they generally exaggerate their revenues ; but sometimes they are unnecessarily cautious.’

‘ I understand my own position perfectly well, Mr. Rennie.’

There was an involuntary bitterness in her tone which did not escape the other’s ears.

‘ But you have friends—relatives, perhaps. I hope that you will reconsider the matter—for these things are serious—in case any tiff has occurred. Pray do not think me impertinent ; I speak as a friend.’

‘ No doubt ; I thank you for it ; but I assure you that you are mistaken. There is no one on whom I have the slightest claim. I am quite alone in the world. The kindness you

have always shown me emboldened me to ask your advice. I heard you mention on one occasion the case of some young lady who earned her living by copying pleadings by a certain method so as to be as clear as print.'

'To be sure ; by the type-writer ; an ingenious machine, but very dear.'

'I have the money to buy one ; and from what you said, I think I could quickly learn to use it.'

'It is a poor way of getting a living, Miss Marvon.'

'It is not so remunerative as being a prima donna, no doubt, but then I have no voice,' said Mary, smiling. 'If you would put me in the way of purchasing such a machine and of securing a respectable lodging, you would greatly oblige me, Mr. Rennie.'

'Your first request is easy enough ; as to the second, I do know of such a place,' said the lawyer, thoughtfully ; it is a boarding house for ladies only. That is so far suitable, and no one is expected to take a private sitting-room. The

proprietor, one Tidman, and his wife are honest, kindly folk ; but the fare, I dare say, is not very luxurious, nor the apartments overwell furnished.' And Mr. Rennie looked round the room with a sense of contrast in his eye, as Charley had done when recommending Mrs. Wilder's establishment.

'Beggars must not be choosers,' said Mary, 'or I should say, rather,' she added (with what the professors of the art of self-defence call 'quick recovery'), 'that persons who have to make their own way in the world, and who find fault with plain living and simple accommodation, do not deserve to make it.'

The lawyer smiled. He had always liked his glass of port and two high pillows.

'And are you in a great hurry to migrate, my dear young lady?'

'Yes ; I should like to do so to-day if possible.'

'Very good. If a bower is vacant in the Tidman paradise you shall hear from me in a couple of hours. You will not forget, however,

when you are translated into it'—here he held out his hand in farewell—'that you have still friends on earth.'

'I shall never forget you, Mr. Rennie, nor your kindness to an orphan girl.'

'Tut, tut, don't talk like that; it's true I've done nothing for you, but the very suggestion is injurious to my profession. The widow and the orphan are its natural prey.'

As he spoke the last words, he turned his back to her; an act—for she was weeping—that showed more true politeness than ten thousand bows and simpers.

'What a kind man he is!' thought poor Mary, left to herself, 'and how delicate it was of him to forbear to press me with interrogations! A woman would never have been satisfied till I had told her all, or quarrelled with me for not telling her.'

'It's a sad case,' muttered the lawyer as he drove away; 'I saw from the first glance at her face that compromise was out of the question. Mrs. Beckett would have been glad enough

had it been otherwise ; she will soon wish she had her “companion” back again, poor silly woman, instead of the other ; but the girl is made of sterner stuff. “I am quite alone in the world,” she said. “There is no one on whom I have the slightest claim.” That’s a strong thing to say and to *feel*, as I could see she did. I have never known any one who has not had a claim, real or imaginary, on somebody. The poor girl must be illegitimate.’

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PHILANTHROPIST.

IN London, which is equal to half a dozen great towns clubbed together, there *are* half a dozen great towns, each so different from the rest that it might well be in another hemisphere. In some quarters, notably in the vicinity of the Victoria Station, where blocks of buildings, each emulating an hôtel de ville, are numerous, the astonished visitor exclaims, 'How foreign!' but in the district I have in my mind he would make use of no such ejaculation. There is nothing like it either on the Continent or anywhere else : it is unique. Nor is that circumstance to be regretted. The streets are narrow ; the shops mean and dirty ; and the neighbourhood is low. And the people. 'Ah! the

people.' It cannot indeed be said of them, in the words of the poet, that—

They are neither man nor woman,
They are neither brute nor human :
They are ghouls—

but they are certainly very peculiar. 'The British shibboleth' of which Byron wrote is in all their mouths, but by no means spoken with the British accent. It is only the female portion of the inhabitants that is native ; the male is polyglot. Every nation under heaven, provided only it has a seaboard, has here its representatives. That they are of the earth earthy, in the spiritual sense, is only too true ; but materially they are of the sea marine ; and everything in the district smells—and smells very badly—of their calling. Flags flutter from every house-top as well as from the masts that tower everywhere above the chimney-tops ; nautical instrument makers, outfitters, ship purveyors, abound. These represent the export trade of the place ; but the imports are much more remarkable. Shell shops, heathen idol

emporiums, wild beast menageries, are as numerous as the establishments for the sale of toffee and penny fiction elsewhere. Fiction is here at a discount; no one reads it, though for the raw material of it there is a glut in the market. Who can behold yonder swart, ear-ringed Spaniard, that ringleted Italian, that shivering Lascar (bound for the opium shop), without the suggestion of a story, not, perhaps, altogether suitable for family reading. Negroes, Norsemen, Frenchmen, all as far apart in character as in clime, but with one thing common to all, a rolling gait—for each has his sea-legs on. Very good fellows some of them, no doubt; but others, as one cannot help imagining, pirates or sea-robbers, murderers of apprentices, plunderers of passengers, scuttlers of ships. This, however, may be a morbid fancy. To the æsthetic mind it is difficult to think evil of men who wear rings in their ears, and are devoted to the fair sex. Of the latter fact there can be no question, or that the tender feeling is reciprocated. There is no

coyness among the ladies in this latitude, nor is the 'absence of the sun' essential to the interchange of endearment; and there are some very pretty quarrels in consequence, arising from the same cause which provoked the Trojan War.

Among the heterogeneous throng that crowds the narrow pavements this sultry afternoon, a tall white-bearded man is conspicuous, partly because he has no sign of the sea about him, but chiefly because he is well dressed. It would have looked better had I written 'because of his aristocratic air,' which, indeed, he possessed in a remarkable degree; but I have observed that no aristocratic air can overcome the effect of a bad hat, and it is well to give honour where honour is due. In Pall Mall this man would have attracted little attention; his long white moustaches hanging like stalactites from his lip; his far-sweeping beard, white and fine as spun glass, would have been set down to mere eccentricity, while his apparel would have differed little from that of others. But in the

place where he now found himself the ordinary garb of a man of fashion was a stranger sight than the robe of the Lascar, or the pigtail of the Chinaman. The ear-ringed, ringleted sailors ; the bonnetless, slightly draped nymphs of the neighbourhood 'standing at the corners of the streets,' just as they did in Jewry in King Solomon's time ; the vendors of caul and charms lounging at their shop doors in wait for the Superstitious, all turned to look at him as he strode by.

If they had known who and what manner of man he was, they would have stared harder, and not a few of them would have endeavoured to make his acquaintance ; for he was in possession of wealth which in their eyes would have seemed boundless, and had a hand that was ever open to the cry of the poor. On the other hand, there was nothing strange to him in those he met. The thieving Greek and the sullen Mulatto, the bland Chinaman and the grinning Negro, were all familiar to him ; he had seen them, or their fathers, in their native

homes, and he had seen them here. He was one of those rare citizens of the world who know their own metropolis as well as though they had been cockney-bred.

Some remarks, not altogether favourable, are made on him from time to time in a tone such as can hardly fail to reach his ear; but for all the notice he takes of them they might have been addressed to Memnon. Only once or twice, when some hulking sailor stops the way, does he appear to be aware of any impoliteness; then he walks straight on as though no such obstruction existed, his massive frame impinges on the churl's shoulder as it seems by accident, but in reality with scientific expertness, and the intruder is left gyrating. His shaggy eyebrows give to the still clear blue eyes beneath them a stern and almost fierce expression, which is intensified on these occasions as he walks on; on the other hand, when a child is in the way, his features soften; if the toddler looks at him, a smile relaxes his mouth, and he stoops to pat some flaxen head, or drop

a coin, which is not copper, into some dirty little hand, which fills the recipient with the wine of astonishment.

So he goes on his way, the observed of all observers, but apparently quite unconscious of the excitement he creates, till presently he reaches a shop over which is painted 'Burzon's Museum'; which is his goal.

To judge from the contents of the place, 'Burzon, Astrologer,' would have been the more appropriate title. From the low, dark ceiling is suspended a stuffed alligator; on the floor lies an Egyptian mummy; and at the very entrance stand two globes, not such as the lady of newly inherited wealth and restricted education complained of as not being 'a pair,' for they are both celestial ones. The walls are hung with various nautical instruments, which in a landsman's eye might well be used for casting horoscopes; while the proprietor himself, in a high peaked fur cap and a dressing gown of doubtful colour, but which might be fitly termed 'the hue of

ages,' looked like the younger brother of 'sage Sidrophel.'

The respect, however, with which he received his visitor was such as it is not customary for any reader of the planets to pay to mortal man. He doffed his cap and bent his head as to no ordinary customer, and murmured in the Hebrew tongue some reverent words of welcome.

'Have you no one with you, sir?' he inquired presently, with a glance towards the door.

'No; Japhet has got a day's holiday with a friend who speaks his language.'

'It is rather riskful, is it not, sir? Our folks about here are a wild lot,' observed the other, deprecatingly.

'I have been used to wilder, and, for that matter, to worse,' observed the other, smiling; 'and though I have lived so unreasonably long, I can still hold my own with most men.'

'Still, if they only knew——'

'What I had in my pocket?' interrupted

the new comer. 'But then, you see, they don't know. It would, as you are doubtless thinking, be much safer to transact these little affairs through a banker's hands; but I don't choose that my banker should know of them, nor any one else save Reuben Burzon.'

A grateful smile lit up the dusky features of his companion.

'May the God of Abraham so serve me and mine and worse,' he answered solemnly, 'if ever I betray your honour's secrets, though He knows they are not things to be ashamed of.'

'Man, however, as I have good cause to understand,' returned the other drily, 'takes a different view of the matter. How is Verda?'

'Well, or nearly well; here is her last letter from Berck. Her nerve, she says, which she had feared had gone for ever, is coming back to her again. She has promised, according to your honour's request, never to perform again without the net.'

'And her father?'

‘Has ceased from all pursuit of her, and is drinking himself to death.

‘That’s well,’ returned the visitor, producing two little rolls of coin, neatly packed in brown paper; ‘tell her not to stir from the sea-side till she is herself again. And how are the little Paris people?’

‘Growing no bigger, and more popular than ever. Antoine is taking fifty pounds a week for them, which is put to their account at your honour’s bankers every Saturday. I think Hébert is choked off. His attempt to farm them on the ground of being their uncle utterly failed, and the Court’s decision as to the arrears has ruined him.’

‘But he is not in Paris? It is impossible that he can harm the children?’ inquired the old man quickly.

‘Quite impossible. He was given the alternative, as your honour suggested, of a prison or expatriation, and he is now in Sweden at his old trade.’

‘The ways of Heaven are marvellous,’

muttered the old man, knitting his shaggy eyebrows so that they formed one hairy line across his forehead.

‘And as merciful as they are marvellous,’ returned the other.

‘You think so?’ observed the visitor, drily.

‘I speak as I find, and in recollection of how your honour found *me*,’ was the earnest reply. ‘I am forty years of age, so that it is two-and-thirty years ago; but I can never forget it.’ A shudder passed over the speaker’s frame.

‘I remember. Poor boy, poor boy! It was in Paris, was it not—at Montmartre?’

‘Yes, sir. Never did a child suffer from the greed of man as I did. I never look at my beasts there without thinking of it. They called me the cat king. I can see myself now in that dreadful cage with the wild cats, pretending to be their tamer. How they flew over me as I cracked my little whip, and gashed my shoulder! There was nothing but

my flesh-coloured jacket to protect me from their cruel claws. Yet what was the pain compared with the terror of it? To this hour, when I dream of it in my sleep, I seem to wake in heaven.

‘And you are still grateful, Reuben?’

‘Ah, yes, I am still grateful,’ returned the other, taking the old man’s hand, and carrying it reverently to his lips. ‘I remember the angel that looked through my bars one day, and beckoned me out, and purchased me from my tyrant.’

‘He was your elder brother, was he not?’

‘He was my brother. But I have not yet learnt to say “God forgive him!”’

‘Poor Reuben, poor Reuben! Come, let us forget him and turn to better things. Show me your wild beasts.’

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INTERRUPTED BARGAIN.

THE relation between these two men, arising in the first instance from the rescue of the one by the other from a childhood of misery, was very curious. On the one side were affection and reverence and a fidelity that never failed; on the other, a matter-of-fact acceptance of those offerings of the soul. The Benefactor was not the benefactor of one but of hundreds; and there were some, though it is true not many, who had repaid him with the like loving service; whose gratitude was not a sense of favours to come, who did not look on his kindnesses as mere stepping-stones to fortune, and who, though they had been raised up from the humblest of positions, were content. In

Reuben's eyes his visitor was an angel whom he entertained by no means unawares ; whereas in those of his visitor Reuben was merely a worthy fellow in whom he confided and took some personal interest. It was not, however, altogether to please Reuben that he had asked to see the wild animals who formed the chief portion of his stock-in-trade, and were the pride and joy of his existence. They had an attraction for Beryl Peyton—who had another side to his nature than that which it most commonly presented to the public—on their own account.

Physical force, agility, strength — nay, ferocity itself, perhaps, though he warred against it—had peculiar charms for him. It had been said of him by one who knew him well, that though he was a philanthropist he had narrowly escaped being a prize-fighter. The alliteration had been too tempting for the epigram-maker, for as a matter of fact money would under no circumstances have been attractive to his friend ; but he was by nature

greedy of combat, as well as of dauntless courage. In earlier times he would have been a free-lance who would yet have disdained to be a mercenary. It would, moreover, have been necessary that the cause for which he fought should be just. On the other hand, his character was far removed from the Quixotic. His passions were strong, yet were as water unto wine in comparison with his prejudices, which were violent, unreasonable, and lasting. A cynical smile lit up his face when, upon his conductor's unlocking a crazy door that led straight out of the museum into the menagerie, he was greeted by a chorus of snarls and yells. He felt it to be a protest of the brute creation against the human, suggested by instinct, but utterly unfounded in reason, since his companion was their feeder and their friend.

The place was a mere stable fitted for the temporary accommodation of the animals brought to Reuben from every quarter of the world for sale. Here were lions in egg-boxes

(or dens that looked little stronger) and tigers in rabbit-hutches. As for the less dangerous, but still exceedingly formidable, animals, such as pumas and hyenas, their cages lined the walls, between which there was but just room for a man to pass without touching them, or being touched, just as though they were fowls in Leadenhall Market. It was difficult for a nervous person to admire what presented itself to his gaze, from the consciousness of what might be pawing, scratching, or even biting him from behind. Reuben himself, however, was no more moved by these attentions on the part of his four-footed and feathered friends than if they had been stuffed.

‘There, sir, are my old acquaintances,’ he said, stopping and pointing to a cage which from its slightness seemed to be made for canaries, but which was tenanted by half a dozen wild cats; ‘I give you my word that I never see them even now without a shudder of terror.’ As they were showing their sharp teeth and swearing like troopers, with every

hair in their bodies, especially their tails, instinct with hate and fury, his apprehensions would have seemed to most people by no means groundless ; but it was evident that he was only affected by reminiscence or association. ‘Think, sir, think,’ he went on, ‘what a poor child must feel on first finding himself in such company.’

‘Ay ; and think of the company that could be gratified by seeing him there,’ observed the visitor, drily.

‘True, sir, true ; and of the brother that could put him to such a trade—his own flesh and blood.’

‘Ay, ay.’ These monosyllables were uttered in a grating, almost menacing, tone. It was plain that it was not only the museum-keeper that was subject to the influence of reminiscence.

‘What I say is, sir,’ continued Reuben, raising his voice above the din of screech and hiss and roar, ‘that these wild cats themselves are gentle creatures compared with such a scoundrel.’

‘Mere purring domestic tabbies,’ was the quiet reply. ‘I don’t wish to hurry your movements, Reuben, but something is spitting at my back.’

‘It is only the emu, sir,’ answered Reuben, carelessly. He *will* spit, whatever happens. Where he gets it all from I can’t think. He beats any sailor I ever knew at that; and yet he’s no tobacco-chewer, either. That’s a fine creature, ain’t it, sir?’

He pointed to a magnificent Bengal tiger in a wooden cage above their heads, in which he was stretching himself (he could just do it, and only just) at full length, with his huge mouth distended in a prolonged yawn.

‘He looks big enough and strong enough, but he’s not in first-rate condition, is he? If he was in India I should almost have said, from the look of his skin, that he had taken to man-eating.’

Reuben looked at his patron admiringly. ‘Upon my life, sir, you seem to know almost everything. The fact is,’ he added, dropping

his voice to a whisper, 'the poor beast did commit himself in that way on shipboard. It was only a Lascar, so there was not much fuss made about it ; but it shows what he's made of. However, he's bespoke by a travelling caravan, where he will be well looked after.'

'Not the one my poor giant has joined, I do hope,' returned the other, smiling.

'No, sir, no ; he's nothing to be afearred on in the way of animals but a spotted woman. She'll have him in the holy bonds of matrimony, if he don't look sharp, before the year's out.—What is it, my lad?'

A sharp-looking little Jew boy had come in from the museum to speak with his master. 'Please, sir, the Don has come. He says he will have no more shilly-shallying, but will you take the Lady or will you not?'

'Very good ; tell him I will be with him directly. I am afraid I must leave you for half a minute, sir,' said Reuben, apologetically.

'Don't mention it,' said the visitor, carelessly.

‘ But who is the Don, and, above all, who is the Lady ? ’

‘ Well, the Lady ’s nothing, sir, ’ returned Reuben, with a half-smile ; ‘ but as to the other, he ’s a very ticklish customer. They call him the “ Don ” because of his looks and ways ; but handsome is as handsome does, is my motto. In my opinion, this tiger here is more to be trusted. He ’s a Mexican, over here for no good, I reckon, though he has brought me a rare piece of merchandise, that may, perhaps, turn out trumps. The finest fellow to look at as ever I clapped my eyes on, but——’

‘ I ’ll see him, ’ interrupted the other, abruptly.

‘ I think it would be better not, your honour, ’ hesitated Reuben. ‘ If he only guessed.——’

‘ Tchut ! You needn’t introduce me. A friend from the country who wants a lion ; at all events, who wants to see one. Come.’

Reuben shrugged his shoulders. He knew

by experience that it was vain to argue with his patron, and led the way back to the museum. A tall fellow was standing with his back to them teasing some lizards in a glass tank. He turned round with a frown that gave way at once to an insinuating smile upon perceiving that Reuben was not alone. He had not yet arrived at middle age, and even in his formal English dress, with a coarse wide-awake which made a poor substitute in point of picturesqueness for his native sombrero, was a splendidly handsome fellow. His fine eyes sparkled like diamonds, his teeth shone like pearls, his very beard had the gloss and shimmer of silk, his smile seemed to light up his fine features like a ball-room just prepared for its guests. A caviller might have objected that there was too much of brilliancy ; otherwise he looked the *beau idéal* of manly beauty. His voice was low and melodious, and the broken English in which he spoke gave it a touch of tenderness.

‘ I did not know you had a friend with you,

Mr. Burzon,' he said, raising his hat for one instant in graceful courtesy.

Reuben's patron did the like; the two men regarded one another with great intentness.

'I think we have met before,' said the Englishman, in no very conciliatory tone; he had the air of one who is endeavouring to call something which is unpleasant to his own remembrance.

'It is possible; everything is possible, but it is not likely,' was the airy rejoinder; 'I have been but a few days in England.' Then he turned to Reuben, as one who dismisses an uninteresting subject, and in a dry, quick way observed, 'Well, about the Princess? Is it "yes," or "no"? I have other offers, and cannot afford to wait.'

'This is the lady this gentleman has come about,' said Reuben, throwing back the lid of a chest behind him. 'She is three thousand years old, he tells me.'

'And as fresh as a daisy,' added the Mexican, sardonically.

The individual in question whose face was thus disclosed was very far from an attractive object. It was a mummy, though not swathed in bandages to the same extent as usual ; it showed something of human form ; while the features, which were exposed, had even some tint of life. The hair, which was coal-black, remained on the skull ; the lower jaw had dropped, showing the teeth and tongue. It was a weird and ghastly sight.

‘ You would hardly guess what that is, sir,’ said Reuben, still addressing his patron.

‘ I have no need to guess. It is an Inca woman.’

‘ Do you hear that ? ’ said the Mexican, triumphantly. ‘ The gentleman recognises the lady. It is, you see, as I told you. Yes, she is a princess of the Incas, and dirt cheap at fifty pounds.’

‘ Is she yours to sell ? ’ inquired the Englishman, quietly. ‘ This inscription on the lid is a little suspicious.’

‘He told me that that was the Inca language,’ said Reuben, simply.

‘Nevertheless, it is what is now spoken in Peru. How do you account’—here the old man turned to the Mexican with a stern look—‘for the words “Belonging to Government,” which I see inscribed here?’

‘I account to nobody,’ returned the other, his face aglow with passion and his hand fingering his hip, as if for some weapon that was not in its accustomed place; ‘the mummy is mine; I suffer no human being to interfere with my affairs.’

‘Just so. You insist upon the rights of property. You were not always, however, such a conservative, if I remember right. Let us hope your ideas upon the sacredness of human life have undergone some change. You show your teeth; that is a mistake, my good sir, since it reminds those who have memories that you know only too well how to use them.’

It is difficult to imagine how a handsome face can become hideous, but at these words of

the Englishman the Mexican's features became not only terrible but loathsome. Every evil passion that disfigures human nature seemed to crowd itself into one concentrated look of hate and rage as he replied, 'You are safe to-day, my friend, but you will not be safe to-morrow; you may be safe to-morrow, but you will not be safe the next day: in my country vengeance is a dish that we eat cold.'

He turned upon his heel and left the house, though not as an ordinary man under the influence of passion would have left it. He walked softly, almost daintily, to the door, then turned round to smile—such a smile as Nero might have worn when the idea first struck him to set Rome alight—and swept his hat off, in grim *au revoir*, with the air of a natural Chesterfield.

'I think you will get your Inca princess for nothing, Reuben,' observed the old man, with a dry chuckle.

'I hope not, sir, for to get it so might be to pay a great price for it,' was the grave

rejoinder. 'That you have made that man your enemy is certain ; though why he should have flown into such a passion, just because you hinted at his being a thief, passes my comprehension.'

'It was not *that*, Reuben ; nobody minds one's knowing what everybody knows ; but I have some private information respecting that gentleman. I met him once in his native land, where he was in hiding among the hills. He had got into trouble, like Mr. George Barnwell, for murdering his uncle ; not that *that* is thought anything of in Mexico, but there were certain circumstances connected with his escape which rendered him unpopular. In that happy country no one is put to death for crime, but is deported to an island off the mainland, and which is the home of yellow fever. The guards are changed every three weeks, which is an expensive item ; on the other hand, no convict is alive after three months at farthest. Escape is considered impossible, as these men are manacled in pairs, and the mile of sea that

lies between them and liberty is infested with sharks. Our friend the Don, however, is not one to be daunted by obstacles. He persuaded his fellow-captive to take to the water with him, and together they swam across in safety. His first act on getting to land was to kill his companion in misfortune, because he was an impediment to his own escape. But even then he had not got rid of him. The chain that united the dead with the living he found it impossible to break, and therefore he took to his teeth.'

'You don't mean to say,' exclaimed Reuben, incredulously, 'that he bit through the chain?'

'No ; he remembered the fable of the file and the serpent, and did not even try it ; but he bit through his dead friend's wrist and by that means obtained his liberty. His fellow-countrymen are not purists in such matters, but though they did not go the length of giving him up to justice, they never forgave him that expedient. They nicknamed him the "man eater," and that is why, I fancy, my

allusion to his splendid teeth put him out of temper.'

'It is no joking matter, sir,' said Reuben, earnestly; 'you have made a most dangerous and mortal enemy.'

'I have made many such,' returned the other, contemptuously, 'and overlived them all. Tchut! He is not worth a glance over the shoulder. Let us look at your Japanese jars.'

Reuben's museum was in some respects like human nature; side by side with some revolting things there were in it some very beautiful objects the worth of which was only understood by a very few persons.

'The best I have are on commission,' said Reuben; 'and here, as it happens, comes the very man that owns them.'

While he was speaking there entered a young sailor in a red shirt.

'Well,' he said, addressing Reuben and bestowing an easy nod on the stranger, 'you've been an all-fired time, you have, in selling those jars.' They were very handsome jars, with a

great deal of external work on them—cranes and water-fowl among reeds—and standing fully four feet high.

‘This gentleman is looking at them,’ said Reuben, significantly, and with a look that would have imposed silence on any English vendor under similar circumstances. But the new-comer was of that nation of whom it must surely have been written by prevision, ‘the tongue can no man tame.’

‘Let him look,’ continued the American; ‘they are things as can stand being looked at, them jars. A hundred and fifty pounds the pair is dirt cheap. It’s only because I am afraid of those water-birds flying clean away—for they’re just as like as life—and leaving the jars plain that I don’t stand out for double the money.’ The possible purchaser here whispered something to Reuben, who, losing his habitual caution for the first time, replied, ‘Yes, Mr. Peyton.’

‘Peyton, Peyton?’ exclaimed the American,

quickly, 'I know that name. Now might you by any chance be Beryl Peyton?'

'Beryl Peyton is my name, sir,' said the old gentleman, drawing himself up with stiffness.

'You don't say? Wal, now, that's strange. Why, I knew your son Harry when he was in New York quite well.'

'Did you? Then you knew one of the greatest blackguards that ever drew breath'—with which unexpected reply Mr. Beryl Peyton spat on the ground and walked out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Never did speech intended to be conciliatory receive such unsympathetic rejoinder.

'Wal, I *am* darned,' said the Yankee. 'What on airth does it all mean?'

'It means,' said Reuben, with a very blank face, 'that we have made two enormous fools of ourselves; I for letting out that gentleman's name, and you for having lost the best chance you will ever have of selling those jars.'

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